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**Steps along the way of perfection: The "Liber Graduum" and early  
Syrian monasticism**

**Ratcliff, Robert Arden, Ph.D.**

**Emory University, 1988**

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STEPS ALONG THE WAY OF PERFECTION:  
THE *LIBER GRADUUM* AND  
EARLY SYRIAN MONASTICISM

By

Robert A. Ratcliff  
B.A. *cum laude*, Baylor University, 1979  
M.Div., Southeastern Baptist  
Theological Seminary, 1982

Adviser: Roberto C. Bondi

A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate School of Emory University in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Division of Religion

1988

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Robert A. Patchett

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#### ABSTRACT:

During the late-fourth or early-fifth centuries C.E., an anonymous author from the Syriac-speaking areas of the Roman or Persian empires composed a text on the monastic life which subsequent tradition has named the *Liber Graduum*. This study will demonstrate that the author considered the relational virtues, i.e. active demonstrations of love and concern for other human beings, the primary tasks of the monastic way. The significance of this fact lies in the consequences it carries for one's understanding of early Christian monasticism both in late-antique Syria and the Mediterranean world.

I will begin by suggesting that the preeminence of the relational virtues in this text calls into question two common ways of categorizing the *Liber Graduum*. First, if love and ministry to others constitute the principal means in the *Liber Graduum* of achieving perfection in the monastic way, then one can no longer claim that this text arose from the Messalian movement, a group of early monastics for whom prayer was supposedly the primary monastic task. Second, the importance of the relational virtues prevents one from applying to this

text the common perception of Syrian monasticism as concerned primarily with self-mortification and solitude. In both cases, while common understandings of Messalianism and early Syrian monasticism cannot serve as adequate tools for analyzing the *Liber Graduum*, this text can itself suggest revisions of those understandings.

By examining the text's division of Christian life into the non-monastic way of *kinutha* and the monastic way of *gamirutha*, I will further indicate the importance of the relational virtues in the *Liber Graduum*. The author contended that while *gamirutha*, the higher form of Christian service, did require the renunciation of property and family which one usually associates with monasticism, its essential characteristics were love and service of others. The dissertation will conclude by pointing out the manner in which the *Liber Graduum's* particular understanding of the relational virtues, especially its assertion that monasticism involves an incorporation into the true humanity of Christ, can deepen one's understanding of the monastic theology of the early church.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation represents the culmination of a dream which has been with me at least since I began undergraduate work. Mention here will be utterly inadequate to thank those who have aided in realizing this dream; yet I will be satisfied with saying too little so that, not having said more, I will not presume to have said enough.

I thank my parents for supporting me in my decision to pursue a field of study which holds little promise of notable financial achievement. I thank also my parents-in-law, who made it possible for my wife to attend pharmacy school (which in turn enabled me to attend graduate school), and whose frequent visits relieved me of child care responsibilities, allowing much-needed writing time.

Many teachers along the way have both conveyed knowledge and served as role models. Bill Pitts and Wally Christian at Baylor first opened my eyes to the fact that Christianity could mean more than my southern American Protestant background told me it could, and introduced me to my foreparents in the church's history. John Steely at Southeastern demonstrated that loving God with one's mind does not inhibit, but rather enhances,

loving God and others with one's heart. He contributed considerable help and encouragement as I began graduate study; his death two years ago diminishes greatly my joy in completing it. All the members of the historical studies department at Emory have made my years here the most fruitful of my life. Most of all I thank my adviser, Roberta Bondi, for her extraordinary help in bringing this project to its fruition. By spending countless hours teaching me Syriac (no easy task, given the nature of the subject and the pupil!), she far exceeded the requirements of the job of adviser. Her expectations for this dissertation, though fair, were always high; graciously, she tells me that they were based on a faith in my abilities. Best of all, she has been throughout this process a good friend.

My final words of thanks go to the two people who most deserve them. My daughter Arden's smiles, laughter, and love have brightened my life through this sometimes dreary task. She has been the best I could have hoped for; a "dissertation baby." My wife Joan has supported me in every way possible: emotionally, financially, spiritually. Her love is the foundation upon which all my work has been built. It is to her that I dedicate this dissertation.

## ABBREVIATIONS

- ACW*      *Ancient Christian Writers*. New York: Paulist Press.
- CSCO*      *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalum*.  
Louvain: Secretariat du SCO.
- CWS*      *The Classics of Western Spirituality*. New York: Paulist Press.
- Dict Sp*    *Dictionnaire de spiritualité, ascétique et mystique*. Edited by Joseph de Guibert. Paris: Editions Beauchesne, 1933-.
- FC*      *The Fathers of the Church*. Washington: Catholic University of America Press.
- GCS*      *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller*. Leipzig: Akademie Verlag.
- MG*      *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, series Graeca*. Edited by J.P. Migne. Paris, 1845-1855.
- NPNF*      *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Reprinted by Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1969.
- SC*      *Sources Chrétiennes*. Paris: Editions du Cerf.

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## CHAPTER 1:

### Introduction and Statement of Thesis

Because of the struggle to establish its identity over against Gnosticism and Judaism, the Syriac-speaking church came to maturity as an independent Christian tradition only in the second half of the fourth century. At the fore of this late blossoming of Syrian Christianity stood Ephrem, a bishop of the city of Edessa late in the century, whose influence exerted itself to a considerable degree in the subsequent theological, exegetical, and liturgical traditions of the Syrian church. Others such as Aphrahat and the anonymous authors of the *Doctrine of Addai* and the *Apostolic Constitutions* provided glimpses into the rich and unique traditions of liturgy and church order among the churches of the eastern Roman and Persian empires. Over the course of the last thirty years scholars have become increasingly aware of Syriac-speaking Christianity, realizing that it was as different from its Greek and Latin counterparts as they were from each other, and that it deserves a place alongside them as one of the major branches of the Christian church during the patristic period.<sup>1</sup>

One can find further evidence of the vitality of the Syrian church during this period in an anonymous treatise on the spiritual life which tradition has entitled the *Liber Graduum*. This text, consisting of thirty sermons directed to a monastic audience, sought to provide a map for the monastic's pilgrimage down the way of perfection. One can say no more about its place of origin than to locate it in the Syriac-speaking regions of the Roman and Persian empires<sup>2</sup>. A variety of factors, including the citation almost exclusively of males as role models from scripture, the presupposition that the text's readers could be priests if they wanted to, and the use of the term "brothers" to address the readers, indicate that the author was male. Beyond this fact, the author's identity has remained so elusive as to give the text an air of mystery. Although one can assign no final certainty to the date of the *Liber Graduum*, the last years of the fourth century can claim a high degree of probability<sup>3</sup>. The British Museum houses the oldest codex, which dates from the seventh century<sup>4</sup>. In 1926 a Hungarian scholar, Michael Kmosko, published the critical edition on which I have based the research for this dissertation.

Certain questions present themselves at the beginning of this examination of the *Liber Graduum*: does the antiquity of a text such as this guarantee its significance? Will the fact that it arose in a fertile period of the church's history mean that studying it will bear fruit for understanding that period? In short, does the *Liber Graduum* deserve the degree of investigation involved in a dissertation? Three facts about this text indicate that it is indeed a worthwhile subject.

First, it represents a theological tradition indigenous to the Syriac-speaking areas. Greek ways of thinking gained considerable currency in the Syrian church after the fourth century. The *Liber Graduum* displays no sign of this Greek influence, either in linguistic or theological terms. This increases the probability that it can provide reliable insight into the theology and spirituality of at least one branch of that Christianity which was uniquely Syrian. At the same time, it stands apart stylistically from the major theological tradition of the fourth-century church in Syria, that represented by Ephrem. The poetic, highly metaphorical mode of theological composition present in the Syriac tradition since the second-century *Odes of Solomon* found its most significant representative in this

fourth-century bishop of Edessa. This method, relying heavily on figurative language and imagery and often written in meter, comprised the major form of theological expression of the Syrian church. Yet the *Liber Graduum*, with its simple prose style and preference for ethical injunctions over poetic allusions, stands outside this literary and theological tradition. It demonstrates that the poetic, metaphorical method of theological expression does not represent the entire theological tradition of the early Syriac-speaking church. An examination of the *Liber Graduum* can therefore provide a clearer picture of the theological and literary variety within Syriac-speaking Christianity.

Second, in the *Liber Graduum* one finds one of the few sources of knowledge concerning early Syrian monasticism which arose from within monastic circles. Scholars have drawn information concerning fourth-century monasticism in Syria primarily from two sources: Ephrem's hymns concerning the anchorites who lived in the mountains surrounding Edessa, and Theodoret's *History of the Monks of Syria*<sup>5</sup>. Yet Ephrem spent his entire career as a busy ecclesiastic<sup>6</sup>, and Theodoret, though once a member of a monastic community, composed his work after

years outside the monastery. They provided a perspective on early monasticism in Syria of the outsider looking in. The author of the *Liber Graduum* was a monastic addressing other monastics, and this text's vision of the monastic life differs from that of Ephrem and Theodoret accordingly. The *Liber Graduum* can enable one to view at least one group of early Syrian monastics' own understanding of their vocation, rather than that of those who were not themselves part of the monastic community.

Finally, in the *Liber Graduum* one finds one of the most detailed expositions of the spiritual life to arise from Syriac-speaking Christianity in the fourth century. If for no other reason than its length, the text's discussions of the obligation to love God and other human beings have no parallel in the literature of the period.<sup>7</sup> No attempt to understand the history of spirituality in the early Syrian church could take place without an examination of the *Liber Graduum*.

This particular vision of the spiritual life stands at the heart of the *Liber Graduum*'s teaching on the monastic way. Some scholars have categorized this as an "ascetical" text, meaning that exhortations to self-mortification comprise its primary message.<sup>8</sup> Although

discussions of the disciplines of the body took up much of the unknown author's time, if one's definition of asceticism involves only physical self-abnegation, then the *Liber Graduum* is not an "ascetical" text. If, however, by this term one means physical and spiritual disciplines designed to render one more capable of loving God and other human beings, then this designation applies quite well to the *Liber Graduum*.<sup>9</sup> The text's primary subject matter is becoming a fully loving person as one progresses along the monastic way of perfection; the disciplines of the body, though important, did not occupy the central position in how one journeyed along this way.

Rather, the *Liber Graduum* prescribes attaining to a particular set of relational and communal virtues in obedience to the commandments of Jesus and in imitation of his example as the primary means of attaining that perfection which was the goal of the Christian life. These virtues are many, yet they all involve active and concrete means of demonstrating love for other human beings.

"You have not arrived at perfection when you pass judgment, but rather have fallen even from the [lesser] way of righteousness";<sup>10</sup> so the author pointed out the

first of these virtues: the refusal to judge others. A citation of the words of Paul indicates the attitude out of which this non-judgmental stance is to arise:

"Consider all better than yourself, and be all [things] to all [people].<sup>11</sup> Beyond holding to this attitude, however, the text calls upon its readers to forgive and accept into their fellowship those who had done them harm. Sermon 4, paragraph 4 claims that "through forgiving those who have offended, stolen from, or done them a great injury human beings will themselves be forgiven by the Righteous Judge." One who travels along the way of perfection is to seek out such conspicuous outsiders as pagans and heretics and teach them the love of Christ by blessing and forgiving them when they seek to put one to death. Although many have borne witness to their faith and received martyrdom for Christ's sake, "they have not arrived at perfection, for they did not love their murderers nor pray for them".<sup>12</sup>

One follows such a lifestyle of forgiveness and reconciliation out of concern for the welfare of others, but also as a means of serving God through obedience to Christ. The *Liber Graduum* classifies almost all of the different varieties of Christ's utterances as commandments, interpreting his entire message as a series

of direct injunctions, given so that one might hear and act upon them.<sup>13</sup> The way of perfection lies in carrying out these "great commandments of our Lord"<sup>14</sup>.

Yet simple obedience to Christ's commandments does not exhaust the range of reasons for undertaking the journey toward perfection. Through forgiving, accepting, and suffering on behalf of others, the followers of the way of perfection share in the ministry of Christ, and will therefore share in his redemption as well.

The sufferings of our Lord were like this: he gave his cheek to the ones who struck him, and spoke words of peace to them and prayed for him. If you find it necessary to suffer in this manner, pray for the one who beats you and make peace with him. For by suffering thus with our Lord, you will be glorified with him (Ser. 17, par. 1).

In one of the text's few explicitly christological statements, ser.30, par.23 draws a direct connection between the life of Christ and the lifestyle incumbent on those seeking perfection by speaking of him as "the firstborn of the perfect ones." The life and ministry of Christ stand as the supreme example of the way of perfection, yet they were more than an example. By refusing to judge, by forgiving the fallen, by loving and suffering on behalf of one's enemies as Christ had done,



individuals will be caught up in the redemptive power of Christ's victory over evil as well.

Once one has established the centrality of these relational virtues to the *Liber Graduum*, one can understand the true place of the monastic lifestyle and the disciplines of the body in the text's vision of the way of perfection. One undertakes celibacy and a restricted diet, not because the needs of the body are evil, but because too much attention to them has long distracted human beings from their primary responsibility to love others. According to this text, bringing the body under control frees one to follow the commandments of Jesus in forgiving and being reconciled to one's fellow human beings:

I control my body so that as a servant I might honor all human beings and stand before them asking peace of them, lowering myself to them. I do this also that I might be eager to come as a servant and do that which pleases my enemies, and to humble myself before those who are lesser than me (ser. 29, par 1).

For the unknown author of the *Liber Graduum*, physical self-discipline was not an end in itself, but a means of facilitating those virtues which led one to God through the way of perfection.

This dissertation will seek to establish that at the heart of the *Liber Graduum's* particular understanding of the monastic life stands the relational virtues. These active demonstrations of love and concern for others were, for the author, the primary monastic tasks. As this statement of thesis should indicate, this will be primarily an exercise in the history of Christian thought. Most of the discussions on these pages will center on what theological understandings motivated the authors of this and other texts to undertake the monastic pilgrimage, and supported them as they continued in it. At times, this study will take up issues relating to the institutional history of the early church, such as in chapter 2 when I will discuss the conflict between the ecclesiastical authorities and the members of the Messalian movement. In places I will also discuss the social history of early Christianity, as in chapter 3's treatment of how the *Liber Graduum* relates to Peter Brown's contention that monastics functioned in the role of *patronus* in the society of the villages of Syria. But because this text and others involved in this study are first and foremost theological treatises, an examination of theological understandings of the monastic life will form the main focus of this dissertation.

## Review of previous scholarship

Scholars have long agreed that the *Liber Graduum* holds considerable significance for understanding the history of Syriac-speaking Christianity and the early church in general. They have failed to agree on what that significance is. They have suggested various issues which relate to this text as those areas in which the study of the *Liber Graduum* can contribute most to historical scholarship. What follows will map out these suggested areas of significance and discuss what various scholars have concluded concerning the *Liber Graduum's* value as a source of historical insight. It will also assess the consequences of these previous scholars' conclusions for my own thesis, and suggest why their work has left room for further study of the *Liber Graduum*.

One of the earliest suggestions as to the *Liber Graduum's* importance concerned its use of the New Testament. In his introduction Kmosko briefly touched upon the subject, claiming that the work's source for quotations from the canonical gospels shared with that of Aphrahat a common textual tradition.<sup>15</sup> Adolf Rucker believed that Kmosko had ignored the possibility that the author of the *Liber Graduum* had not used the four

separate gospels at all, but rather the Diatesseron, a collation of the canonical gospels into one narrative which enjoyed widespread currency in the Syrian church through the mid-fifth century.<sup>16</sup> Through an exhaustive examination Rücker concluded that those citations which Kmosko had assigned to the Gospel of Matthew most closely resemble the version of the stories of Jesus' life and ministry one finds in Ephrem's commentary on the Diatesseron. For Rücker, the importance of the *Liber Graduum* lies in the fact that it adds to the (incomplete) knowledge of the Diatesseron one can derive from Ephrem.

In a more recent study Aelred Baker suggested points of contact between the *Liber Graduum* and the *Gospel of Thomas*.<sup>17</sup> Proceeding from the possibility that a Semitic substratum underlay the latter document, he pointed out certain similarities in each text's use of words and phrases. Chief among these is the *Liber Graduum*'s use of the term *ihidaya*, "solitary", which Baker believed corresponds to *monachos* in the *Gospel of Thomas*. He also claimed similarities in theological orientation. Both texts, he argued, emphasize the primacy of interior spiritual activity, to the extent that outward activities are finally unimportant. Baker concluded that, while the

*Liber Graduum* is obviously not a Gnostic text like the *Gospel of Thomas*, these similarities suggest some sort of connection between the communities which produced the two documents.

The importance for my own work of these studies involving the *Liber Graduum* and the New Testament has been slight. Rücker placed his focus on the Diatesseron, concerning himself with the *Liber Graduum* only as a tool for reconstructing this ancient collation of the gospels. While Baker's contention that the community of the *Gospel of Thomas* might have held links to that of the *Liber Graduum* would certainly hold much significance for the study of the latter document, he produced evidence of such a tenuous and often incorrect nature as to cast fundamental doubt on his whole hypothesis. The term *ihidaya*, which appears far more often in other Syriac texts, is inconsequential for the *Liber Graduum*.<sup>18</sup> Baker's attempt to equate *gamirutha* (perfection) with *ihidayutha* (solitariness) presumes that the former merely refers to the monastic lifestyle as it involves separation from society, and ignores the term's meaning as a way of relating to God and other human beings. His contention concerning the devaluation of outward activity in the *Liber Graduum* also fails to consider the central

position which active demonstrations of love for others occupies in its description of the way of perfection. I would not deny that establishing the existence of points of contact between the communities of the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Liber Graduum* would add much to our understanding of both of these texts. I would question whether Baker achieved any success in demonstrating from his examination of the texts themselves that such points of contact did indeed exist.

Another *locus* around which scholarship concerning the *Liber Graduum* has settled is the provenance of the text, most notably its date. Kmosko realized first that establishing a date for this document would facilitate assessing its importance in the literature of the Syriac-speaking church. He based his own theory on references in certain passages to the possibility of persecution.<sup>19</sup> Kmosko believed that such mention of persecution presupposed that it was actually taking place among the text's readers at the time of its composition. A thorough search of the records of Syrian Christianity yielded the persecution of the Persian emperor Sapor in the years 339-344 as the one which best fit the situation as the *Liber Graduum* described it. Kmosko admitted that

one could assign no final certainty to this date, yet he did stand convinced that the text arose in the first half of the fourth century, making it one of the earliest non-Gnostic texts of Syriac-speaking Christianity.

In an article specifically concerned with the subject of the *Liber Graduum*'s date, I. Hausherr contested Kmosko's use of persecution as the key to the time of this document's origin.<sup>20</sup> He claimed that Kmosko had misread some passages and ignored others in his desire to find an early time of composition.<sup>21</sup> Instead of persecution Hausherr posited two other means of arriving at the date of the *Liber Graduum*. First, and most definitive, stood the use of the Diatesseron. Like Rücker, he noted that the text's reading of the gospel narratives followed the Diatesseron more closely than the Peshitta, Rabbula's Syriac translation of the New Testament. The composition of the *Liber Graduum* must therefore have fallen prior to 435, when Rabbula completed the Peshitta and the Syrian church accepted it as its official version, outlawing the Diatesseron. Second, Hausherr found in the *Liber Graduum* references to ideas and events which presupposed familiarity with earlier writings, particularly those of Ephrem. Since this placed the date no earlier than the last three

decades of the fourth century, Hausherr set 370 to 435 as the limits of the text's composition. He suggested the years around 400 as the most likely, out of consideration for the time needed to disseminate Ephrem's writings.

Subsequent discussions of the *Liber Graduum* have accepted a late-fourth century date, although none have been willing to assign one as specific as Hausherr's, nor to discuss the subject in as much detail. Robert Murray located it in the same time frame as Ephrem and Aphrahat, the latter years of the fourth century.<sup>22</sup> Admitting that it might be a conservative document from the fifth century, he nonetheless insisted that the absence of reference to the issues of the christological controversy placed its date before the schisms which split the Syrian church in the middle of that century.<sup>23</sup> The most recent reference to the *Liber Graduum* has been that of Sebastian Brock, published in an article in 1986, in which he agreed with dating the text in the late fourth century.<sup>24</sup>

The question of date, although an important one, will not hold determinative significance for this study. If (as I believe to be the case) it arose in the latter half of the fourth century, then it was roughly contemporary with Ephrem's descriptions of the Edessan



anchorites.<sup>25</sup> This is important because the *Liber Graduum's* relational understanding of the monastic way would have arisen side by side with Ephrem's highly individualistic understanding (this *contra* Vööbus, who saw in Syrian monasticism an evolution from primitive, anchoritic forms, to more advanced, coenobitic expressions of the monastic impulse). Yet if the *Liber Graduum* originated in the mid-fifth century, it contrasts considerably with Theodorat's *Historia Religiosa*, which also paints an individualistic, "ascetical" picture of early Syrian monasticism. In either case, a comparison with contemporary descriptions of Syrian monasticism heightens one's appreciation of the importance of the relational virtues in the *Liber Graduum*.

Perhaps the one issue which scholars most often raise in reference to the *Liber Graduum* is its relationship to Messalianism, a heretical movement arising from within the ranks of Syrian monasticism in the late fourth century. Its chief tenets supposedly included belief in a demon which joined itself to the soul at birth, and only which fervent prayer could remove. When Kmosko compiled his edition in 1926, Messalianism occupied the thoughts of many historians of the early church due to the discovery by Louis Villecourt

six years earlier that the Macarian homilies contained phrases from the *Asceticon*, a manual of Messalian belief which the Council of Ephesus had condemned in 431.<sup>26</sup> Since the *Liber Graduum* holds several similarities to the Macarian homilies, Kmosko sought a possible link between this text and the Messalian movement as well. He compared, among other theological ideas, the Messalian insistence that only continual prayer could effect human salvation with this text's teaching that prayer and self-renunciation can release one from the power of sin.<sup>27</sup> Because this text's teachings on prayer and salvation resemble those of the Messalians, yet are not identical to them, he concluded that the *Liber Graduum* does not qualify as a Messalian document, but rather that it represents an early form of the movement, one as yet not outside the bounds of orthodoxy.

The work of I. Hausherr stood Kmosko's contention on its head; rather than an early form of this heresy, the *Liber Graduum* contains a later, more developed form of Messalianism.<sup>28</sup> Hausherr began by agreeing with Kmosko that this text's teachings on sin, prayer, and the place of the institutional church and its sacraments in human salvation fail to correspond with the description of

Messalianism as one finds it among its earliest opponents, Ephrem and Epiphanius, who condemned the Messalian movement in the 370's. Yet he claimed that later descriptions of the heresy by the anti-Messalian councils in the early fifth century closely resemble the *Liber Graduum's* views on these subjects. He concluded that Messalianism had undergone a certain amount of development, and that the *Liber Graduum* bears witness to this development. For Hausherr, the fact that the *Liber Graduum's* teachings differ to an extent from the Messalianism one finds in Ephrem and Epiphanius was not reason to question whether the text is a Messalian document, but rather what kind of Messalianism it represents.

Vööbus framed the question differently; he asked what the distinctive doctrines of Messalianism (early or late) actually were, and questioned whether one finds an explicit statement of these doctrines in the *Liber Graduum*.<sup>29</sup> His enumeration of the Messalian distinctives is as follows:

1. A demon inhabited and joined itself to the human soul from birth.
2. Neither baptism nor the sacraments could rid the soul of this demon.

3. Prayer was the only sufficient way to expel the demon.

4. The double result of the demon's defeat was *apatheia* (conquest of the passions) and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Vööbus denied the presence of these doctrines in the *Liber Graduum*. He contended that Kmosko, writing at a time when Messalianism was much in scholarly vogue, found in this text correspondences with the heretical movement which further investigation cannot detect. Hausherr's belief that the *Liber Graduum* contains an implicit statement of the Messalian doctrines tells one more about Hausherr than it does the text itself. Vööbus concluded that without an explicit espousal of any of the theological distinctives of Messalianism one would be hard pressed to label the *Liber Graduum* a Messalian document.

Antoine Guillaumont agreed with Vööbus in denying that the author of the *Liber Graduum* consciously held to any of the distinctive doctrines of Messalianism.<sup>30</sup> Yet he disagreed that the association of the text with this heresy was pure fancy. He found in this document a common Syrian understanding of sin and grace which, although not itself heretical, was the seed from which

the later Messalian heresy came to fruition. Theologians of the Syriac-speaking tradition often spoke in spatial terms of the operation of grace in the soul, such that sin "filled up" the soul until grace came and began increasingly to "crowd it out".<sup>31</sup> Out of this spatial understanding grew the Messalian idea that not sin, but a demon inhabited the soul until prayer cast the demon out and brought the coming of the Holy Spirit. Guillemonet found the former of these ideas in the the *Liber Graduum*, and claimed that it stood within that general Syrian theological milieu which gave birth to the Messalian heresy. While one cannot place the *Liber Graduum* in the category of Messalianism, neither can one deny that some association between the text and the heretical movement did exist.

If one is to find the key to the the *Liber Graduum*'s understanding of Christian perfection, one must look elsewhere than the Messalian views on the demon, prayer, and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Yet with Guillemonet, I must reject Vööbus's claim that no connection existed between this text and the Messalian heresy. I would suggest, however, that rather than interpreting the *Liber Graduum* by means of the Messalian doctrines, one should

do the opposite: employ this text as a tool for reconstructing the character of Messalianism. Hermann Dörries has contended that certain anti-ecclesiastical tendencies lay at the heart of the earliest Messalian teachings.<sup>32</sup> This text's vociferous denunciations of the ecclesiastical authorities on the one hand and seemingly out-of-place protestations of loyalty to the institutional church and its sacraments on the other deserve investigation in light of Dörries's theory. In chapter two I will compare the *Liber Graduum* with the earliest descriptions of this heretical movement to suggest that the author of the text was aware of the anti-ecclesiastical nature of the Messalians' message, and sought to avoid association with them. Messalianism will not explain the *Liber Graduum*, yet this early monastic text might help explain the true nature of this early monastic heresy.

Arthur Vööbus has put forward yet another suggestion as to where to locate the real importance of this text, claiming that it opens a window onto a critical transition in the history of Syriac-speaking Christianity. According to Vööbus the Syrian church insisted on celibacy from all its members during its first three centuries.<sup>33</sup> Yet after Constantine the large

influx of new members into the church made this impracticable, and a new ethic accepting marriage for Christians came to the fore. Vööbus saw in the *Liber Graduum*'s division of Christians into the "just" and the "perfect" a conservative reaction to this lowering of the church's standards.<sup>34</sup> The new majority of church members, who reckoned marriage a legitimate option for Christians, made up the body of the just. Those who obeyed a higher set of commandments and maintained the old tradition of celibacy stood among the perfect. The *Liber Graduum* represents a transitional phase in that it does not reject the new ethic, but rather simply considers it a lesser form of Christian service.

Vööbus observed correctly that perfection in the *Liber Graduum* requires obedience to the higher commandments. Yet at the heart of the higher commandments are not "there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven," but rather "[forgive] seventy times seven" (Matt. 19:12, the former of these two gospel citations and a classical text supporting celibacy, receives mention in the *Liber Graduum* only once. The latter, Matt. 18:22, is quoted seven times). Vööbus centered his attention on the text's call for celibacy among the

perfect, yet failed to note that one undertakes celibacy, as well as voluntary poverty, to free oneself from those patterns of normal life in society which stand in the way of a life of forgiveness and reconciliation.<sup>35</sup> Is the *Liber Graduum* an ascetical text in Vööbus's understanding of the term (i.e. one which equates "asceticism" with self-mortification)? Although it did view the disciplines of the body as necessary aids to achieving Christian perfection, the answer is no, because non-judgmentalness, acceptance, and forgiveness occupy the center of its attention, rather than celibacy. Vööbus's theory concerning the *Liber Graduum* and the institutional history of Syriac-speaking Christianity falls short of assessing the text's significance for Christian history due to his limited understanding of asceticism.

A final suggestion as to how to approach the importance of the *Liber Graduum* came from Antoine Guillaumont. He believed that this document can best serve as a text in which to view the spirituality of early Syriac-speaking Christians.<sup>36</sup> He found in the *Liber Graduum*'s exposition of the way of perfection what he termed a mysticism of the spirit (*mystique pneumatique*). The essential difference between



righteousness, the lower form of Christian life, and perfection, the higher form, lies in the degree to which each involve the coming of the Holy Spirit. Those in the lower group, the just, receive a portion of the Spirit; its plenitude comes only to the perfect, those who follow the higher way. This fullness of the Holy Spirit results in the ability to see others as better than oneself, and to live peaceably with all human beings. Guillamont saw in this spirit mysticism a tradition which flowed from such early Syriac Christian writings as the Odes of Solomon, through the *Liber Graduum* and contemporary writers such as Aphrahat, and on to later theologians, notably Philoxenus and Joseph Hazzaya.

Of all previous studies, Guillamont's comes closest to my own perspective on how best to appreciate the importance of the *Liber Graduum*. I agree that the text's author intended his discussion of perfection to address the life of the Spirit. Also important for my thesis has been Guillamont's notice that perfection involves a particular attitude and lifestyle toward others.

However, in spite of this appreciation for his work, I must disagree for two reasons with his attempt to describe this text in terms of a "spirit mysticism".

First, it obscures the essentially outward-looking character of the *Liber Graduum's* spirituality. Whether or not he intended it, Guillamont's choice of the term mysticism holds connotations of an interior type of piety which is alien to this text. He seemed to make the relational virtues a result of that inner experience of the Spirit in which perfection lies, rather than themselves the experience which characterizes perfection. Second, evidence does not abound to support the centrality of the reception of the plenitude of the Spirit in the *Liber Graduum's* definition of perfection. The text often draws a distinction between the life of the perfect ones as "spiritual" and those of other persons as "earthly;" and the lifestyle of perfection does take place "in the Spirit." Yet the idea of the fullness of the Spirit as that which constitutes perfection appears so infrequently as to make one wonder why Guillamont chose to construct his interpretation of the whole text around it. He recognized the importance of the relational virtues when he noted that they resulted from this plenitude of the Spirit. He would have done well to devote more attention to this aspect of his study.

From this review of previous scholarship one can conclude that a consensus has arisen regarding the *Liber Graduum*: it is a text of sufficient historical consequence to deserve serious investigation. Unfortunately, the consensus breaks down beyond this point. What does such investigation yield? The answers have been varied, and at times contradictory. Early vs. late- fourth century, Messalian vs. non-Messalian, celibacy vs. spirituality; one might despair of arriving at any certainty as to the central themes of this text or its role in understanding the history of the early church. Yet I would point out that, since Kmosko's introduction (the conclusions of which subsequent scholars have often abandoned), every consideration of the *Liber Graduum* has come either in an article-length study devoted to the text or an article or book addressed to another subject. The detailed investigation which scholars seem to agree this document warrants has yet to be forthcoming. I hope that this dissertation will correct that situation.

Further, previous scholarship has left considerable opportunity for assessing the importance of the relational virtues to this text's vision of the way of perfection. Only Guillaumont has mentioned the role of

forgiveness and non-judgmentalness in the spirituality of the *Liber Graduum*, and even he relegated them to a secondary position. Yet the major elements of the text's exposition of the Christian life - the distinction between the way of perfection and that of righteousness, the division of Christ's words into "greater" and "lesser" commandments, the proper purpose of the ascetical disciplines - all point toward the idea that the highest form of Christian service involves acceptance, reconciliation, and forgiveness of others according to the example of Jesus. The possibility that these relational virtues occupied the center of the unknown author's beliefs concerning the monastic life has received insufficient attention. The purpose of this dissertation lies in demonstrating that, without understanding that active demonstrations of love make up in this text the milestones along the journey toward perfection, one cannot understand the *Liber Graduum*.

ENDNOTES: CHAPTER 1

1. This renewed appreciation of the uniqueness of the Syriac-speaking tradition began with the work of Arthur Vööbus in the 1950's, and has continued in the scholarship of such individuals as Sebastian Brock, Robert Murray, and Edmund Beck.
2. Only two scholars have made suggestions concerning the *Liber Graduum's* place of origin, both of them tentative. Basing his claim on the text's mention of the turbulent waters of the Euphrates, Kmosko posited an area in the central Persian Empire; preface to *Liber Graduum* (Paris, 1926), clix-clx. Pointing out the *Liber Graduum's* difference in style from Ephrem and Aphrahat, Robert Murray put forward the possibility that the text originated in a different literary milieu, possibly western Syria; *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (London, 1975), 34-36.
3. See the discussion of date on pp. 11-12 of chapter 1.
4. Kmosko, i.
5. Two good examples of the reliance on Ephrem and Theodoret as sources of knowledge for early Syrian monasticism are Arthur Vööbus's *Literary-Critical Studies in Ephrem the Syrian* (Stockholm, 1958), and Pierre Canivet's *Le monachisme Syrien selon Theodoret de Cyr* (Paris, 1977). Vööbus in particular displayed complete confidence in the completeness of Ephrem's picture of early Syrian monasticism.
6. Recent studies have called into serious doubt the traditions that portrayed Ephrem as an anchorite. See especially Edmund Beck, "Ascétisme et monachisme chez s. Ephrem," *L'Orient Syrien* 3 (1958), 253-298.
7. Kmosko's edition of the Syriac text of these 30 sermons is over five hundred pages long.
8. One of the most recent references to the *Liber Graduum* treated it as a text on the ascetical lifestyle: Jean Gribomont, "Monasticism and Asceticism: Eastern

Christianity," in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. by Bernard McGinn (New York, 1985), p. 93.

9. One way of categorizing texts on the monastic life (and spiritual life in general) is to label "ascetical" those which reflect a more active, relational understanding of that life, while those which emphasize its contemplative aspects one calls "mystical" texts. According to this scheme, the *Liber Graduum* is definitely an ascetical text.

10. Ser. 5, par. 11.

11. Ser. 2, par. 6. This quotation resembles Paul's words in Phil. 2:3, yet the author consistently ascribed it to Jesus, drawing, as in several other instances, on an unknown source.

12. Ser. 30, par. 4.

13. For example, ser. 19, par. 2 alternated between referring to the same statements of Jesus as parables and as commandments.

14. Ser. 1, par. 2.

15. Kmosko, clxii-clxv.

16. Adolf Rücker, "Die Zitate aus dem Matthäus-Evangelium im syrischen 'Buche der Stufen'," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 20 (1932), 342-354.

17. Aelred Baker, "The Gospel of Thomas and the Syriac *Liber Graduum*," *New Testament Studies* 12 (1965-1966), 49-55.

18. The terms *ihidaya*, its plural (*ihidayē*), and its abstract (*ihidayutha*), occur only six times in the 515 pages of the *Liber Graduum*'s Syriac text.

19. Kmosko, clxix-clx.

20. I. Hausherr, "Quanam aetate prodierit *Liber Graduum*," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 1 (1935), 496-502.

21. Hausherr raised two objections to Kmosko's reading of the passages concerning persecution: first, the passage central to Kmosko's argument, ser. 8, par. 4, introduced its discussion of persecution with a grammatical clause indicating that what followed was a hypothetical possibility, rather than a historical reality. Second, Kmosko passed over ser. 30, par 4, which spoke of persecution as a thing of the past.

22. Murray, 34-35.

23. Murray seems to ignore the fact that Jacob of Sarrug, a late-fifth/early-sixth century Monophysite leader who was no stranger to the controversy with the Chalcedonians wrote dozens of sermons in which no hint of the dispute between the two parties appears.

24. Sebastian Brock, "The Syriac Tradition," in *The Study of Spirituality*, ed. by Cheslyn Jones, et al (New York, 1986), 206-207.

25. Arthur Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, CSCO, vols 184 & 197 (1958-1960), II:70-179.

26. Louis Villecourt, "La date et l'origine des 'Homélies spirituelle' attribuées a Macaire," *Comptes rendus des séances a l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (Paris, 1920), 250-258.

27. Kmosko, cxxxix-cxlix.

28. Hausherr, "*Liber Graduum*" 497-499. See also his "L'erreur fondamentale et la logique du Messalianisme," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 1 (1935), 328-360.

29. Arthur Vööbus, "*Liber Graduum*: Some Aspects of its Significance for the History of Early Syrian Asceticism," *Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile* 7 (1954), 108-128. See also *HASO* I:178-184.

30. Antoine Guillaumont, "Situation et signification du *Liber Graduum* dans la spiritualité syriaque," *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 197 (1974), 311-325.

31. Guillaumont pointed out that this spatial understanding of the relationship between sin and grace in the soul manifested itself not only in such fourth-

century works as the *Liber Graduum* and the Macarian Homilies, but in such later Syriac-speaking theologians as Philoxenus as well.

32. Hermann Dörries, "Urteil und Verurteilung: Ein Beitrag zum Umgang der Alten Kirche mit Häeretikern," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 55 (1964), 78-94. See also his *Die Theologie des Makarios/Symeon* (Göttingen, 1978), 11-18. Dörries has made the helpful observation that the earliest condemnation of Messalianism, that of the council of Side in 390, centered its attention on the Messalians' devaluation of the sacraments. However, by the Council of Constantinople in 426, the inhabitation of a demon in the human soul from birth occupied first place on the list of the Messalians aberrations.

33. Arthur Vööbus, *Celibacy: a Requirement for Admission to Baptism in the Early Syrian Church* (Stockholm, 1951). Compare this with Robert Murray's article "The Exhortation to Candidates for Ascetical Vows in the Ancient Syriac Church," *New Testament Studies* 21 (1974-1975), 59-80. Murray believed that the early Syriac-speaking church did not require celibacy of all its members, but rather that the surviving literature of this period reflected the high estimation of celibacy among those members of the hierarchy who composed this literature.

34. Vööbus, "*Liber Graduum*," 114-124.

35. One can find a good example of the *Liber Graduum's* attitude toward the ascetical disciplines in sermon three's discussion of voluntary poverty. Here the author claimed that those who sought to meet the physical needs of the poor invariably had to spend more time raising money than they did distributing it. The more one sought to help, the more one had to raise, and the less time one had to spend in one's primary task. Rather than involve oneself in this self-defeating process, the *Liber Graduum* noted, it was better to become poor oneself. Note that this is not a rejection of possessions as evil, but a recognition that normal life in society placed constraints on one's ability to serve God and other human beings.

36. Guillaumont, 316-325.



## CHAPTER 2: The *Liber Graduum* and Messalianism

Scholars have assessed the early monastic movement known as Messalianism in a variety of ways, from the great soteriological heresy of the East, equivalent in importance to Pelagianism in the West<sup>1</sup>, to a group of less-than-orthodox monastics who never organized themselves into a sect nor produced a definitive statement of their beliefs.<sup>2</sup> The disparity of these statements reflects the uncertainty surrounding what was taking place among the monastics of eastern Christianity under the name "Messalianism." The term itself derives from the Syriac *mzalyane*, a participial form meaning "those who pray." It refers to the supposed Messalian belief that only fervent prayer can effect salvation. Originating in Syria and Mesopotamia during the latter half of the fourth century, the Messalian movement spread to monastic groups in Egypt and Asia Minor around the turn of the century. Opposition to the Messalians culminated in their condemnation at the ecumenical council of Ephesus in 431.

In the introduction to his critical edition of the *Liber Graduum* Michael Kmosko claimed that this late-fourth or early-fifth century Syriac monastic text contained an early form of the Messalian heresy.<sup>3</sup> This claim established a connection in the minds of scholars between the *Liber Graduum* and this monastic movement to such an extent that the authors of practically every subsequent study of the text have felt compelled to comment on its alleged Messalianism.<sup>4</sup> It did not, however, establish any unanimity as to the relation between the two, in that some scholars have perceived in it a thorough explication of the Messalian doctrines, while others have denied their absence from the text altogether. In spite of such divergent conclusions, all of these studies proceeded on the common assumption that a particular set of anti-Messalian sources, beginning with the writings of Ephrem Syrus and Epiphanius of Salamis in the 370's and concluding with the council of Ephesus of 431, accurately described the group's beliefs and practices, and that these descriptions should form the criteria according to which one might decide upon the alleged Messalianism of the *Liber Graduum*.

Yet recent studies have cast doubt on the accuracy of the composite picture of early Messalianism which these sources present, creating opportunity for further inquiry into the beliefs of these early monastics and the reasons for their conflict with the ecclesiastical authorities. I propose that on the basis of a critical reading of the *Liber Graduum* and the anti-Messalian sources one can arrive at a new reconstruction of the origins of the Messalian movement in which charges of anti-ecclesiastical beliefs comprised the actual substance of the church hierarchy's accusations against this group of monastics. I will lay the foundation for this reconstruction by examining the anti-Messalian sources' claim that the primary Messalian errors consisted of aberrant views of human nature and the problem of evil, and by pointing out reasons for questioning the reliability of this claim. From here the focus will shift to the *Liber Graduum* itself, which contains a description of a conflict between a group of monastics and the church's hierarchy in which the latter charged the former with questioning the value of the sacraments and rejecting the authority of the church (to which the author of the text responded that the hierarchy was in truth objecting to the monastics' ministry to

pagans and heretics). I will then point out that, once one discounts those elements which describe their opponents' beliefs in terms of a heretical doctrine of human nature, the anti-Messalian sources speak of just such attitudes toward the worth of the sacraments and the authority of the institutional church as the primary Messalian errors. Taken together, the *Liber Graduum* and this critical reading of the anti-Messalian sources provide strong evidence for seeing in the early Messalian controversy a dispute over certain monastics' loyalty to the church and its sacraments rather than heretical doctrines of human nature, free will, and the problem of evil.

The chapter will conclude with an overview of the secondary studies which deal with the relation of the *Liber Graduum* to Messalianism, and an analysis of the text to determine whether it contains those doctrines which these studies presupposed as characteristic of the Messalians' beliefs. This analysis will further point out the unreliability of the anti-Messalian sources' presentation of Messalianism as a heretical view of human nature and the problem of evil by demonstrating that the

*Liber Graduum*, one of the few texts thought to embody Messalianism, does not contain these "Messalian" doctrines at all.

#### The anti-Messalian sources

The earliest reference to the Messalians, and easily the most cryptic, is that of Ephrem Syrus in hymn 22 of his *Contra Haereses*, written around 370.<sup>5</sup> Coming last in a long series of denunciations of heretical groups, Ephrem says the following about the Messalians:

And the *mzalyane*, who are licentious:  
it [would be] good for him [God] to bring them back  
to his fold.  
All has slipped from their hands,  
and they have nothing to hold on to.

The word translated here "licentious" contains the substance of Ephrem's charge against the *mzalyane*. Ephrem accused the Messalians of some sort of moral reprehensibility, yet failed to elaborate as to its substance. As Hermann Dörries has pointed out, Ephrem's intention was to denounce the Messalians, not explain them to historians.<sup>6</sup>

A further reference to the Messalians' morally questionable behavior occurred in the next mention of this group, that of Epiphanius of Salamis's *Panarion*,

written around 377.<sup>7</sup> Epiphanius's first charge was of sexual immorality. The Messalians had gained notoriety for allowing (unmarried) men and women to sleep in each others' company, even in public places and open fields. Such behavior had gained the attention of Christian and non-Christian magistrates alike, both of whom had punished them severely for such flagrant debauchery. Although himself doubting that the Messalians were guilty of actual sexual immorality, Epiphanius roundly criticized them for their naive lack of concern about its appearance.

Much of Epiphanius's complaint against the Messalians involved similarly naive attitudes toward a variety of issues. Their renunciation of possessions, though commendable in itself, had led to an unseemly denigration of the value of work. Although some admired their acts of self-denial, others denounced the excessiveness of these acts as pagan impieties. Finally, their claims to a sensible experience of God through the practice of ecstatic prayer furthered the impression that they had sprung from a pagan, rather than a Christian, origin.

Epiphanius's description revolved around the ideas of simple-mindedness, ecstatic behavior, and excess; the Messalians' acceptance of the lifestyle of poverty and self-denial was so complete that they knew neither discretion nor moderation. He summarized his accusations when, near the end of his remarks, he said that the Messalians "from beginning to end, from head to foot, from last to first....have neither precepts, nor order, nor laws."<sup>8</sup> It was not the Messalians' theology, but rather their lack of submission to either the internal authority of their own self-discipline or the external authority of the church, which worried Epiphanius most.

A decisive progression beyond Epiphanius in the church's relation to Messalianism took place in 390, when 25 bishops met at Side to condemn the heresy.<sup>9</sup> Amphilochius of Iconium, student of Basil and friend of the other Cappadocian fathers, presided over this local council. The bishops' assessment of the Messalian movement differed considerably from that of their predecessor, Epiphanius. The council castigated the Messalians, not for failing to recognize the need for limitation and a sense of authority in their practice of

the monastic life, but for holding to a specific list of theological aberrations. That list, as Theodoret of Cyrrhus recorded it, is as follows:

1. Baptism can remove the "prior" or "outer" manifestations of sin,<sup>10</sup> but it is incapable of dealing with the "root" of sin.

2. Only constant prayer can affect this root of sin, which is the presence of a demon in the soul.

3. The demon lives in the soul from birth, inciting it to sin.

To this list of theological errors the council added the following questionable activities:

1. The Messalians refused to work.

2. Under the influence of demons they entered an ecstatic state, dancing and gesticulating wildly. In this state they claimed to predict the future, as well as see the descent of the Holy Spirit and the Trinity with the eyes of the body.

3. Upon being confronted with their heresy, they would immediately deny their adherence to it and denounce their colleagues.

Side represented a significant change in attitude toward the Messalians. No longer were they Epiphanius's simple-minded followers of a suspiciously primitive lifestyle. They had become the promulgators of false doctrines, chief among which was the rejection of the efficacy of the sacraments, and a rejection of the church's place in the order of salvation.



In 426 Sisinnius, newly elevated bishop of Constantinople, called another local council, among the purposes of which was to deal with the spread of the Messalian heresy.<sup>11</sup> The council of Constantinople relied heavily on Side's list of Messalian errors, yet changed it in three highly significant ways. First, it began its own list of the group's heterodox beliefs by attributing to the Messalians the idea "that every person is immediately upon birth joined substantially to a demon, which he inherits due to Adam's condemnation; and that this demon, to which he is bound substantially, moves him to commit unheard of acts."<sup>12</sup> The bishops gathered at Constantinople then offered this presence of the in-dwelling demon as an explanation for the Messalian rejection of the efficacy of baptism; the sacrament was ineffective because it could not deal with this fundamental flaw in human nature. At Constantinople the Messalians' chief error thus became a heretical anthropology rather than a denigration of baptism, as it had been at Side.

Second, Constantinople added the charge that the expulsion of the demon brought *apatheia*, freedom from the passions. The council related this to Epiphanius's earlier charge of sexual impropriety by attributing to

the Messalians the belief that this *apatheia* freed them from lust, allowing them to engage in sexual intercourse outside of marriage "according to the conditions of heaven" (in other words, without sin).<sup>13</sup>

A third difference between the councils of Side and Constantinople lay in the latter's discussion of the trinitarian and christological beliefs of the Messalians. Along with other enthusiastic practices the council of Side rebuked the heretics for believing themselves able to see the Trinity with the eyes of the flesh. The council of Constantinople denounced their opponents not only for claiming to see the Trinity, but for believing the wrong thing about what they saw: "they say that the three hypostases of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are dissolved and transformed into one hypostasis."<sup>14</sup> Added to this Sabellian doctrine of the Trinity was a docetic christology as well, placing the Messalians among the other heretical goats which the church was at that very time engaged in separating from the orthodox sheep.

The final, decisive step in the controversy with the Messalians took place at the ecumenical council of Ephesus in 431.<sup>15</sup> The bishops at Constantinople had expanded upon the work of their predecessors at Side by

making heretical understandings of human nature and the root of sin the primary Messalian errors. The council of Ephesus further broadened this focus on anthropology by denouncing not simply a list of Messalian errors, but rather the *Asceticon*, the group's handbook of belief, which the bishops Valerian and Amphilochius had brought to the council.<sup>16</sup> Enlarging upon Constantinople's idea of the "substantial union" of the demon with the human soul, Ephesus rebuked the Messalians for their belief that "evil is from nature" (*phusei ta kaka*),<sup>17</sup> and their concomitant denial of free will. On the basis of this and other theological errors the council condemned the *Asceticon* and anathematized any who read it or associated themselves with the Messalians. Ephesus set the terms for the church's attitude toward this group of monastics, with all further discussion of Messalianism by orthodox theologians proceeding on the basis of the council's characterization of the heresy.

And so Messalianism, as the councils of Constantinople and Ephesus described it, stood guilty primarily of heretical understandings of human nature, free will, and the origin of sin in the soul. Considerable variance exists between this presentation of the Messalians' errors and Epiphanius's charge of

simple-mindedness and lack of self-discipline, and even the council of Side's claim that denial of the efficacy of baptism comprised the Messalians' chief heresy. One might explain this variance by suggesting that, with the passage of time, the Messalians' opponents gained an increasingly clearer knowledge of their adversaries' beliefs. Yet two elements of the story of the ecclesiastical authorities' condemnation of this group render this explanation untenable, and suggest the inaccuracy of Constantinople and Ephesus's characterizations of Messalianism.

The first of these elements is a letter which Cyril of Alexandria wrote shortly before the council of Ephesus to Amphilochius, bishop of Side, advising Amphilochius on how to deal with these heretics.<sup>18</sup> Cyril proposed a simple treatment: handle the Messalians with moderation, eliciting from them an oath denouncing their heresy and promising not to mention its leaders or writings ever again. No further precautions or punishment were necessary, since the Messalians were "simple people" (*idiotai*). Cyril made no mention of the Messalians alleged theological errors.

Two things stand out about Cyril's response to the Messalians. First, his use of the term *idiotai* strongly resembles Epiphanius' ascription of simple-mindedness to the Messalians. Rather than the three anti-Messalian councils' picture of dangerous promulgators of false doctrine, Cyril's letter recalls Epiphanius's description of the Messalians as naive practitioners of a primitive monastic lifestyle. Second, Cyril's call for moderation in dealing with these heretics reinforces the impression that he did not take most of the charges against them seriously. Anyone familiar with the christological controversy of the fifth century knows that Cyril did not make his reputation by treating those whom he considered dangerous heretics with an open mind and a moderate hand. One must doubt that he would have counselled Amphilochius to treat the Messalians so gently had he considered the extent of their heretical beliefs to be as great as the anti-Messalian councils portrayed it.

Certain issues surrounding the *Asceticon*, the supposed handbook of Messalian belief, provide even more compelling evidence of the unreliability of the anti-Messalian councils' descriptions of their opponents. John of Damascus's *De Haeresibus Compendio* contains those passages which the council of Ephesus excerpted from this

text as proof of the Messalians' heterodoxy. By comparing these excerpts with the *Spiritual Homilies* of pseudo-Macarius, Louis Villecourt claimed that part of this classic of eastern Christian spirituality contains the *Asceticon*.<sup>19</sup> Building on the work of Villecourt, Hermann Dörries undertook a detailed comparison of the meanings of the passages which the council excerpted from the Messalian document with their counterparts in the Macarian homilies. He concluded that the council misrepresented the teachings of the *Asceticon* to facilitate its condemnation of the Messalians.<sup>20</sup> One example of this misrepresentation involves the Messalians' alleged belief in the indwelling demon and their denial of free will. According to Villecourt, the council excerpted its second proposition from the same passage in the *Asceticon* as found in sermon 27, par. 19 of the Macarian Homilies. Seen together, they present strong evidence of the council's selective reading of the *Asceticon*:

John of Damascus:

Satan and the demons occupy the minds of human beings, and human nature has fellowship with evil spirits.

*Macarian Homilies:*

Do you not know that there are evil spirits? Satan and the demons occupy the mind and bring the soul to ruin. The many-faceted devil has means and methods, and in many ways takes up occupancy in the soul and the thoughts. Thus he does not allow one to pray rightly and draw near to God. The soul has fellowship with evil spirits, even as it can associate itself with the angels and the Holy Spirit. It can be a temple for Satan, but if it wants, it can be a temple of the Holy Spirit.

In its original context, this passage made fellowship with either the demons or the Holy Spirit the result of the exercise of human free will. The council, however, by speaking of the presence of a demon in every soul as a necessary part of human experience and making the demon the root of sin, caused this passage to abrogate human free will. Through careful editing the council was thus able to draw from this passage a denial of that which it originally affirmed. As this example makes clear, the *Asceticon* yielded evidence of the Messalians' heretical teachings only after the council had done considerable violence to its actual meaning.

Beyond these doubts concerning the council of Ephesus's reading of the *Asceticon* lies the question of whether the Messalians would even have produced such a document. Epiphanius and Cyril portrayed them as undisciplined wanderers who followed a naïve and primitive monastic lifestyle. Would such "simple people" likely have written a detailed theological treatise? More to the point, had one of them written it, would it have achieved recognition as the group's official doctrinal statement? The latter possibility presupposes a degree of organization and instruction among the Messalians for which no evidence exists. Along with denying that the *Asceticon* contains the so-called "Messalian" doctrines, one must question whether the text condemned at Ephesus arose from a Messalian milieu, or at least represented the Messalians as a group, at all.

These considerations render the anti-Messalian councils' descriptions an unsatisfactory foundation on which to construct an understanding of this early monastic movement. They leave open the question of the Messalians' beliefs and practices, as well as the reasons for their controversy with the ecclesiastical authorities. We turn now to the *Liber Graduum* in an attempt to suggest answers to these questions.



# A reconsideration of early Messalianism

Most previous studies of the *Liber Graduum* and Messalianism have begun with a common list of Messalian doctrines, those provided by the anti-Messalian councils, and have proceeded to discuss whether the text contains these doctrines, proving or disproving thereby its status as a Messalian document. I propose a reversal of perspective; rather than seeking to unlock the theology of the *Liber Graduum* with a Messalian key, one should examine this text for help in reconstructing the nature of the controversy between the Messalians and their ecclesiastical opponents. The *Liber Graduum* can offer such help for two reasons: first, because the text describes a controversy in which members of the church's hierarchy had accused a group of monastics of denigrating the sacraments and rejecting the authority of the church. And second, because those elements of the anti-Messalian sources which present fewer critical problems (i.e. that which remains after one has discounted the description of Messalianism as a heretical understanding of human nature and free will) accuse their opponents of similar anti-ecclesiastical teachings.

The best place in the *Liber Graduum* to begin searching for clues concerning the controversy between the Messalians and the ecclesiastical authorities is sermon 12. The text's only treatment of ecclesiology, it weaves a complicated image of the existence of the church at three levels: the "visible church," the "church of the heart," (which refers to the monastic quest for perfection) and the "church which is in heaven." The author conceived a necessary line of progression between the three, taking great pains to emphasize the importance of the first if one is to ascend to the second and the third:

But if we doubt and despise this visible church, this visible altar, this visible priesthood and this baptism which effects atonement, our body will not be an altar, nor our heart a wellspring of praise; nor will we have revealed to us that church which is on high, its altar, its light, and its priesthood, where are gathered all the saints, those whose hearts are pure, who dwell in its glory and rejoice in its light. For they did not despise this blessed nurse, which every day bears and brings up fair wards and sends them to that great church on high. This visible church is manifest to all; our Lord established its altar, its baptism and its priesthood, for our Lord and his apostles prayed in it, baptized in it, sacrificed his body and blood in it and truly acted as priests in it. It is the church in truth, the blessed mother which brings up all children, and the body and the heart in which our Lord dwells; and because of the Spirit which abides in it, it is in truth a temple and an altar, because our Lord dwells there.<sup>21</sup>

The author's meaning requires little further explanation; one can by no means bypass the visible church and its sacraments if one seeks to enter into the church which is above.

Nothing unusual presents itself about such an affirmation of loyalty to the visible church until one recognizes its isolation in the context of the entire document. If the visible church occupies such an important place in the theology of the *Liber Graduum*, one must wonder why it receives mention only in this particular sermon and one other short passage.<sup>22</sup> If the "church of the heart" (the state of perfection) bears a mirror image to this visible church, and progress in the former depends on participation in the latter, why does not the institutional church appear in any of the text's dozens of discussions of the monastic search for perfection?

One might explain this anomaly by pointing out the lack of anything extraordinary when a treatise on the monastic lifestyle fails to refer to the importance of the church. Many of the early expositions of the monastic way (particularly those of Syria) spoke seldom on the subject of the institutional church.<sup>23</sup> This indicates no indifference or hostility to the "visible

church;" on the contrary, it reflects the fact that the early monastics presupposed its centrality to their search for salvation and perfection.<sup>24</sup>

Yet this still makes the *Liber Graduum* an oddity. If the institutional church and its sacraments did not find mention in the vast majority of the text's discussions of the way of perfection because the author simply presupposed their importance, why did he consider it necessary to assert a belief in the centrality of the church in such vociferous terms in this one spot? Did the author fear that someone might impugn his loyalty to the institutional church? And if so, why?

The author may have felt it necessary to assert this loyalty to the church because other passages in the text strongly criticize the church's leaders for their treatment of monastics. Sermon 30 begins with a detailed discussion of the activities of the "disciples of faith" and the "disciples of love." The latter are monastics who come to pagans and heretics and, through their example of loving concern, convert them. The former, whom the text identifies as leaders of the institutional church, also seek to convert these groups; yet equally as often they commit violence against them, saying "There should not be

idols in the land of the Lord God!"<sup>25</sup> But these ecclesiastics did not persecute only pagans and heretics; by their tolerance of and ministry to those outside the orthodox fold, the monastic "disciples of love" also aroused the church leaders' violent opposition. Sermon 30, paragraph 4 sharply criticizes the "disciples of faith" for engaging in such persecution:

The martyrs of love are persecuted and killed by the sons of the house of faith. [The disciples of love] come to pagans in humility in order to teach them; and the pagans, rather than kill them, welcome them. But the sons of the house of faith think they possess all of the truth in their faith, so that when a person comes in love speaking to them about that which is hidden from them, they rise up in anger and kill him, because he teaches that which they will not preach to the congregation. They do not know that if one does not love as our Lord and his apostles loved, that person does not possess all truth.

The author was not referring here to a hypothetical situation; he knew of and described an incident which took place in the vicinity of his monastic community in which the church hierarchy had taken strong, possibly violent, action against a group of monastics. From the author's perspective, the reason for this action was the monastics' tolerant attitude toward pagans and heretics.

The church hierarchy, to whom the text elsewhere refers as "rulers" (Syr. *rishanē*), receives further rebuke in sermon 19. The distinction between the higher,

monastic way of life of "perfection" (*gamirutha*) and the lesser, non-monastic way of "righteousness" (*kinutha*) comprises the theme of this sermon, with one of the chief distinguishing characteristics between the two being an injunction, given to those seeking *gamirutha*, against judging others. The prohibition against judgmentalness is so complete that it closes the door of ecclesiastical office to those who would be made perfect, because the disciplinary functions of such office necessarily involve passing judgment. This did not constitute a rejection of ecclesiastical authority altogether; paragraph 24 explains that the *rishanē* have a legitimate place in the divine plan: "the *rishanē* each have their own particular place [of service], for they teach the evildoer to seek that which is right." "But," it goes on to say, "the *rishanē* will not be made perfect." Useful though it may be to the correction of the wicked, sitting in judgment on other human beings precludes following the higher commandments of perfection.<sup>26</sup>

This is particularly true if those on whom one sits in judgment are the followers of perfection themselves. Paragraph 31 of sermon 19 voices the author's strong objection to the mistreatment of monastics by the rulers

of the church. It does so first by reminding those seeking perfection not to consider the *rishanē* candidates for the way of perfection unless they have abandoned their positions of authority. Next, it rebukes the *rishanē* themselves for persecuting monastics out of the mistaken impression that the monastics' acceptance of other human beings constituted moral and doctrinal laxity:

And you, *rishanē*, acquaint yourselves with the lifestyle of perfection, and stop complaining about us, accusing us, despising us for no reason, and persecuting us in vain. For it is our rightful ministry to live in [perfection] and walk according to it before all human beings, admonishing and teaching them in love and humility that which our Lord taught us and demonstrated to us in his very being, revealing it to us with kindness and mercy.

By this particular act of passing an unjust judgment on monastics, the ecclesiastical authorities had not merely disqualified themselves for the monastic search for perfection; they had, according to the author, opposed themselves to it.

And so the *Liber Graduum's* attitude to the institutional church revolves around two poles. On one side stands confidence in the efficacy of the sacraments and affirmation of the legitimate role of ecclesiastical authority in the divine economy. On the other stands a stinging rebuke of the church hierarchy for persecuting

monastics. The tension in this two-fold attitude toward the church leads one to ask questions of the historical setting which might have occasioned it. What might have been happening during the time of this text's origin which would have led the author to produce equally vociferous protestations of loyalty to the church and criticisms of its leaders?

A possible suggestion might be as follows: the author was aware that a conflict between the church's leaders and a group of monastics had led the one to take strong, perhaps even violent, measures against the other. In that the author did not accept the charges which these *rishanē* had brought against their monastic opponents, we have at least one monastic perspective on this controversy: the ecclesiastics had in truth opposed themselves to these monastics' ministry to such outsiders as pagans and heretics. Whether the community of the *Liber Graduum* itself bore the brunt of such persecution, and therefore could speak on behalf of those monastics involved in this controversy, is uncertain. Yet ministry to pagans and other outsiders did occupy a place in the traditions of monastic spirituality,<sup>27</sup> and it would not



be difficult for those monastics undergoing this persecution to assign such hostility toward them to the church hierarchy's inability to understand this practice.

The *Liber Graduum* also provides insight into the *rishanē*'s side of this argument. By its incongruous affirmations of loyalty to the visible church, its sacraments, and its officers, sermon 12 betrays the author's knowledge that the charges against the monastics involved denigration of the worth of the sacraments and the authority of the church (as perhaps the stridency of these affirmations reveal the author's fears that the charges might contain an element of truth). By making certain that no one could doubt his loyalty to the institutional church, the author was seeking to protect the community of the *Liber Graduum* from such charges.

The question to be answered at this point is whether the controversy which the *Liber Graduum* describes and the church's condemnation of the Messalians were one and the same event. When one bypasses those sections of the anti-Messalian sources which critical examination reveals to be unreliable, one finds that these sources accuse their opponents of anti-ecclesiastical beliefs which strongly resemble those portrayed in the *Liber Graduum*.

Three aspects of this orthodox opposition to the Messalians correspond quite well to the *Liber Graduum's* account of a conflict between the institutional church and a group of monastics.

First, Theodoret's *Ecclesiastical History* records three instances in which, following the council of Side, bishops evicted monastics who had been tainted with Messalianism from their dioceses.<sup>28</sup> In the third of these, Letoius of Melitene "saw that many monasteries, or shall I rather say, brigand's caves, had drunk deep of this disease. He therefore burnt them [the monasteries], and drove out the wolves from the flock." Such activity on the part of the bishops, were it known to one who did not accept the charges of heresy which occasioned it, would certainly elicit from that individual the type of denunciation one finds in sermons 19 and 30 of the *Liber Graduum*.

Second, at the heart of Epiphanius's description of the early Messalians stands a rejection of all authority, including that of the church. Remember that Epiphanius did not accuse his opponents of false doctrine, but rather criticized them for enthusiastic practices (more for their unseemliness than anything else) and the appearance of a sexual impropriety of which he admitted

he did not consider them guilty. He summarized his remarks by rebuking them for living "without precepts, without order, and without laws." What most bothered Epiphanius was the Messalians' failure to recognize the need for any external authority, including (and probably especially) that of the church.

Finally, certain elements in the condemnation of the Messalians by their ecclesiastical opponents point to the latter's belief that the former rejected the efficacy of the sacraments. The first of these elements comes in Theodoret's *Ecclesiastical History*.<sup>29</sup> Theodoret denounced the Messalians because, among other things, they "did not hold themselves aloof from the communion of the church." This seems a strange complaint until one realizes that Theodoret was not actually criticizing his opponents for their participation in the Eucharist, but for their hypocrisy in doing so.<sup>30</sup> Considering a denigration of the sacraments fundamental to the Messalians' beliefs, he expected them to stay away.

A second indication of possible anti-sacramental teachings on the part of the Messalians comes from the council of Side. As I have said, serious questions remain as to the reliability of the overall presentation of the Messalians' beliefs which this and the councils of

Constantinople and Ephesus have provided. Yet one reason for these questions lies in the difference between the council of Side and its successors on the very question of the Messalians' rejection of the efficacy of the sacraments. At Side, the heretics' denial of the value of baptism came first on the list of their errors, with issues of the demon in the human soul as secondary to this denial. At Constantinople and Ephesus, the opposite held true; the Messalians' main error was an aberrant view of human nature, from which the councils derived a rejection of the sacraments. The evidence of the Messalians' anti-ecclesiastical and anti-sacramental tendencies which Epiphanius and Theodoret provide lends more weight to the council of Side's interpretation of the primary Messalian error than those of Constantinople and Ephesus.

And so the *Liber Graduum* and these elements of the historical record concerning early Messalianism come together to present a common picture of the controversy between this heretical group and the ecclesiastical authorities. On the one hand, the early anti-Messalian sources speak of their opponents as a group of monastics whose questioning of the church's authority and denial of the worth of its sacraments led to a (sometimes) violent

clash with the church's hierarchy. On the other, although not employing the term "Messalian," the *Liber Graduum* demonstrates an awareness of a considerably similar situation; the author criticized the leaders of the church for persecuting monastics on the basis of supposed anti-ecclesiastical and anti-sacramental beliefs. These two sets of witnesses to the early controversy over Messalianism, although coming from different sources and perspectives, fit together to provide strong evidence for a reconstruction of this chapter of the church's history in which the main issues of contention were not the in-dwelling demon as the root of sin, but rather the rejection of the church's authority over monastics and denigration of the value of its sacraments.

The association by scholars of  
the *Liber Graduum* with Messalianism

This reconstruction of the character of Messalianism is a new one; until recently, scholars have presupposed the accuracy of the anti-Messalian councils' description of this movement. Much of their confidence in this

understanding of Messalianism rested on Villecourt's identification of the *Asceticon* with the Macarian homilies;<sup>31</sup> with a Messalian text in hand, one could further understand the nature of the group's heretical teachings. The same is true of the *Liber Graduum's* supposed Messalianism; the presence of the "Messalian" doctrines in this text proved it to be a Messalian document. The reverse of this assumption worked to confirm scholars' confidence in the anti-Messalian councils' presentation of Messalianism's theological distinctives: the fact that particular texts such as the Macarian homilies and the *Liber Graduum* embodied this set of doctrines further demonstrated that these were the theological hallmarks of Messalianism.

Hermann Dörries derailed this circular line of reasoning by demonstrating that one cannot find the so-called Messalian doctrines in the Macarian homilies.<sup>32</sup> I propose to do the same for the *Liber Graduum*. If their presence in the *Liber Graduum* suggests that such teachings as the indwelling demon as the root of sin and the sole efficacy of prayer were distinctive of the Messalians' beliefs, then their absence from this text will have the opposite effect. I will begin with a

review of previous studies which have associated this document and this early monastic movement, presenting their arguments <sup>for</sup> and against its Messalian character. I will then point out the need to go beyond these studies by searching the text for each doctrine on the anti-Messalian councils' list of their opponents' errors in order to indicate the inadequacy of this list, not only for describing the theology of the *Liber Graduum*, but for that of the Messalians as well.

Michael Kmosko, editor and translator of the *Liber Graduum* into Latin, determined the shape of much of the future scholarship on this text when he undertook a study of its possible connections to Messalianism.<sup>33</sup> His work on this subject included a compilation of all references to the Messalian heresy dating from the fourth through the seventh centuries.<sup>34</sup> His study took place during a period when, due to Villecourt's discovery concerning the *Asceticon* and the *Spiritual Homilies* of pseudo-Macarius, many historians of early Christianity were displaying enthusiasm for the investigation of this till-then obscure heresy.

Kmosko contended that although the author of the *Liber Graduum* composed his work prior to the beginnings of the Messalian movement, its understandings of the

nature of the fall, the transmission of original sin, and the relation of the spiritual disciplines to the sacraments anticipated the Messalian misunderstandings of these doctrines, without being themselves heretical. Rather than a demon which inheres in all human beings from birth, he claimed that the *Liber Graduum* puts forward a principle of concupiscence as the result of Adam's fall. The Messalians taught that baptism can at best cleanse one of the outward manifestations of sin, but that it could not produce salvation due to its impotence against the root and cause of sin, the demon. According to Kmosko, the author of *Liber Graduum* believed in baptism's power to remit sins completely and bring about salvation, although this principle of concupiscence did remain, causing further mischief. Finally, whereas the Messalians insisted on fervent prayer as the sole means of dispensing with the demon, Kmosko's reading of the *Liber Graduum* included fasting and other acts of self-renunciation as antidotes to concupiscence.

On the basis of his early dating of the *Liber Graduum*, Kmosko concluded that the text was not a Messalian document, but that it contained certain theological emphases out of which the later doctrines of



Messalianism grew. I. Hausherr also based his theory concerning the *Liber Graduum* and Messalianism partially on his dating of the text; but because he located the *Liber Graduum*'s origin fifty to seventy five years later than did Kmosko, he arrived at a very different conclusion as to the Messalian connections of the community from which the *Liber Graduum* arose.<sup>35</sup> With Kmosko, he agreed that the text did not fully resemble the picture of Messalianism which its early opponents, Ephrem and Epiphanius, drew of it around the year 370. Yet he explained this difference by dating the *Liber Graduum* in the first decade of the fifth century, so that, rather than Kmosko's belief that it contains an as-yet orthodox "proto-Messalianism," Hausherr contended that this text represents a later, more theologically sophisticated form of Messalian teaching.

Drawing on the anti-Messalian sources, Hausherr reconstructed the Messalian doctrines in a systematic form. At the heart of this system lay a confusion between the presence of sin and grace in the soul and one's psychological apprehension of the soul's condition.<sup>36</sup> Hausherr explained that, because they experienced temptation as a psychological reality within themselves, the Messalians posited a demon within the

soul as the root of sin, rather than distinguishing between temptation (which comes from outside the soul) and the response of the will to that temptation (which comes from within). In like fashion the Messalians inferred from their awareness of the continuing power of post-baptismal sin the inability of baptism to root sin out of the soul, instead of drawing a distinction between the mystical operation of grace in baptism and the limited psychological experience of that operation.

Hausherr claimed that by applying this emphasis on a psychological apprehension of a spiritual reality in a more sophisticated fashion the *Liber Graduum* demonstrated its highly developed form of Messalianism. Whereas the early Messalians had claimed to see a visible manifestation of the Holy Spirit as a result of their often-excessive acts of ecstatic prayer, the *Liber Graduum* described a more mystical reception of the plenitude of the Holy Spirit on the basis of performance of such spiritual disciplines as contemplation. Yet in both cases the Messalian insistence on a psychological apprehension of the activity of the Spirit in the soul was present. Hausherr accounted for the differences between these two descriptions of the reception of the

Holy Spirit by seeing in the *Liber Graduum* a more theologically subtle, yet no less heretical, form of Messalianism.

Hausherr's work, on which many scholars have relied for their descriptions of Messalianism,<sup>37</sup> further strengthened the assumption that the *Liber Graduum* stood in some sort of significant relation to this heretical group. It did not make this assumption impregnable, however, as one can see in the Estonian church historian Arthur Vööbus's rejection of the entire claim to a connection between the *Liber Graduum* and Messalianism.<sup>38</sup> Vööbus's approach to the problem was simple: did, he asked, the *Liber Graduum* contain an explicit statement of the essential Messalian beliefs? For an enumeration of these essentials he drew on Hausherr's work, which broke the Messalian system down into four distinctive doctrines: a demon which inhabits every human soul from birth as the cause of sin; the inefficacy of baptism and the other sacraments against this demon; the sole ability of fervent prayer to expel the demon from the soul; and, with the demon's departure, the coming of the Holy Spirit, bringing *apatheia* (freedom from the passions). Vööbus flatly denied that one could find any of these doctrines in the *Liber Graduum*. He claimed instead to

find there such wide-spread monastic attitudes toward the struggle with demons and the role of physical self-denial which, if they were Messalian, would make every monastic a member of this heretical group. He concluded that, due to the intellectual climate of excitement surrounding Messalianism following the discovery of the correspondence between the *Asceticon* and the Macarian homilies, Kmosko saw connections between the *Liber Graduum* and this heresy which could not stand up to further scrutiny.

Antoine Guillemonet, who has produced several articles relating to the *Liber Graduum* and Messalianism, agreed essentially with Vööbus's denial of the Messalian character of this early monastic text.<sup>39</sup> Yet rather than reject the connection between the two as pure fancy, he saw in the *Liber Graduum* a peculiarly Syrian understanding of the operation of grace which he believed gave rise to the Messalian heresy. This understanding envisioned the soul in spatial terms, such that sin (or sometimes Satan) fills up the soul until grace (or the Holy Spirit) comes, driving the former out and filling up the space vacated by its absence.<sup>40</sup> This way of understanding the presence of sin and grace in the soul, which Guillemonet claimed to find in such other Syrian

theologians as pseudo-Macarius and Philoxenus as well, was not itself heretical; it only became such when the Messalians based their aberrant views of human nature and soteriology on it. Like Kmosko, he argued that the *Liber Graduum* anticipated the Messalian heresy while not promulgating any heretical teachings itself. Yet, not as certain as Kmosko concerning the date of the text, he did not draw a chronological line of development between the *Liber Graduum* and Messalianism, nor was the scope of the connection he perceived between the two as broad as that of the Hungarian scholar.

#### The *Liber Graduum* and the "Messalian" doctrines

With the exception of Kmosko, whose work requires reconsideration due to his reliance on the highly questionable "principle of concupiscence" as the link between the *Liber Graduum* and later Messalianism, none of these scholars have undertaken a detailed examination of the text, comparing it systematically with each of the alleged Messalian doctrines to prove or disprove its agreement with them.<sup>41</sup> What follows will attempt such an examination in order to demonstrate the absence of these

doctrines from the *Liber Graduum*, as well as to indicate their inadequacy as a characterization of the beliefs of this early monastic group.

1. The substantial union of a demon with every human soul at the time of birth. This demon, which has been joined to the soul as a result of Adam's fall, is the root and cause of sin.

The idea of a demon, or Satan, joining itself to the soul at birth and subsequently causing it to commit "unheard of acts" finds no mention in this text. Many references to Satan (although very few to the demons, to which the *Liber Graduum* refers as "unclean spirits") do appear, yet none speak of Satan as acting within the soul as the cause of sin. Sermon 7, paragraph 8 says that while Satan and the demons do attempt to lead us astray, we stand responsible for our own sin because we have attended to the temptation:

For they belong to the unclean spirits of their own accord, because they have listened to them, and been their servants. They have broken God's law, not keeping God's commandments and defiling their bodies. Thus the [unclean spirits] torment them sometimes openly, sometimes secretly. But they rule only those who have listened to them, as Paul said: "You are the servant of the one to whom you give your ears."<sup>42</sup>

Those ideas which the councils of Constantinople and Ephesus made the primary Messalian errors, that evil is a substantial part of human nature because a demon lives within the soul, directing it to sin, find no mention in the *Liber Graduum*. Satan and the demons can provide the occasion for sin, but the cause lies in the exercise of one's own will.

Nor can the Messalian belief in substantial union with a demon as the legacy which Adam passed on to all his descendants characterize the *Liber Graduum*'s teaching on the result of the fall. For the unknown author of this text, the punishment for Adam's sin grew out of the nature of the sin itself. Turning their attention and devoting their love to the things of earth, Adam and Eve chose to relinquish "heavenly things" (communion with their creator) in favor of "earthly things" (the full nature of which is never clear; sometimes this phrase refers to an inordinate pursuit of food and sex, yet at other times it denotes the desire to judge good and evil in other human beings, in order to become like God.) "The house of Adam departed therefore from [the things of] heaven and loved [the things of] earth, ... having transgressed the law of their creator" says sermon 15, paragraph 8. God punished Adam and Eve by making this

choice a permanent one; sermon 21, paragraph 1 recounts God's description to Adam and Eve of the result of their sin: "It has released you from the heavenly things, and from the sweetness of your creator, and has bound you to transgression, labor, anxiety, and pride."

Being bound to the things of earth meant accepting a life of travail and suffering as one must provide for those physical needs which God had looked after in the Garden. Sermon 21, paragraph 7 says that before the fall Adam "rejoiced with the angels above, without anxiety or sickness. He had no concern for clothing or hunger, because God provided for him, according to the pattern of his kindness, with milk from heaven." All this was lost after the fall.

More importantly, this same passage also says that the fall resulted in an inability to live in that kind of loving and accepting relationship with other human beings which had been God's original intention for humanity. It meant that the way of perfection, which had been the normal form of human life, was now out of reach. The text makes this point by speaking of Christ's work as restoring that which Adam had lost: " Adam lived in the



beginning according the perfect will of God; Jesus came to manifest this [way of life] himself to those who wish to be made perfect by imitating him."

Being bound to the earth, with its necessary labor and pain, produced an enmity and hatred between human beings which led them away from that for which God had created them, the way of perfection. Rather than an indwelling demon, it was this inability to love others which comprised the root of sin. Sermon 5, paragraph 8 contains a passage which, outside its context, might sound quite "Messalian" indeed:

"There is no one among the children of Adam who has not first sinned and then been made righteous. For this thought which was planted in Adam on the day in which he transgressed the commandment has been planted from the womb in all of his children. Now some, recognizing this in themselves, struggle and prevail over it, and are made righteous. But others are overcome by it and because of it commit evil."

Did the author refer here to the demon which lived in all persons from their birth, leading them to commit "unheard of acts?" No, because the antecedent to which the phrase "this thought" (Syriac *hai machshbatha*; another translation would be "this attitude") refers is the preceding three chapters' discussion of the attitude of judgmentalness. Adam's fall bound human beings to a life of hardship and suffering as they sought to provide for

their own sustenance; this in turn produced a care and anxiety over life which erected barriers between oneself and one's fellow human beings. For the author of the *Liber Graduum*, it is this fundamental break between human beings, and not an indwelling demon, which stood as the root of sin.

2. The inefficacy of baptism or the other sacraments of the church in expelling the demon from the soul.

Obviously, with no reference to the demon living within the soul, one would not expect the *Liber Graduum* to speak of baptism's inability to expel it. Yet this accusation would apply if the text were to denigrate the role of baptism and the institutional church in human salvation apart from any reference to the demon. With its consistent emphasis on the relational virtues as the definitive path to perfection, one might expect the church and its sacraments to hold little value to the author of the *Liber Graduum*.

Yet such is not the case. In two passages the author evidences a belief in the efficacy of the church's sacraments and a high regard for them. The first comes in sermon 24, paragraph 1, which contains the author's affirmative response to the question of whether God

forgives post-baptismal sins. Apart from an interest in the fact that this issue could create controversy as late as the fourth century, its mention has obvious consequence for the *Liber Graduum's* alleged Messalianism. Any debate over whether sins committed after baptism receive forgiveness presupposes a confidence in baptism's ability to remit sins committed before it takes place. According to the councils of Side, Constantinople, and Ephesus, a Messalian would consider the whole matter superfluous, denying baptism's capacity to deal effectively with the problem of sin at all.

Beyond this basic affirmation of the efficacy of baptism, the *Liber Graduum* contains sermon 12's explicit statement of the author's belief in the fundamental place of the institutional church and its sacraments in the scheme of salvation, as well as a denunciation of those who separate themselves from them. As we have seen, one would have difficulty finding a more strongly-worded affirmation of loyalty to the institutional church in a monastic text than that contained in this sermon.

The absence of any conception of a demon inhabiting the soul renders the author of the *Liber Graduum's* belief in the inability of baptism to remove it impossible; this in turn indicates the inadequacy of this idea as a

characterization of the Messalians' theology. Yet this sermon demonstrates that in the controversy one finds recounted in the *Liber Graduum*, the ecclesiastical authorities were accusing their monastic opponents of rejecting the efficacy of the sacraments and the authority of the church. If one accepts the author as sincere, and if the *Liber Graduum's* record of this conflict between monastics and ecclesiastics is indeed a contemporary account of the early Messalian controversy, then with this sermon the author has acquitted himself of the charges of Messalian anti-ecclesiasticism.

3. The sole efficacy of fervent and constant prayer in removing the demon.

Even Hausherr, the strongest proponent of the *Liber Graduum's* Messalian connections, admitted the absence from this text of any emphasis on the exclusive worth of prayer.<sup>43</sup> Yet he claimed that behind the anti-Messalians' accusations concerning prayer stood a deeper concern: that the Messalians, in their zeal for the monastic lifestyle, had substituted the human activities of self-renunciation and spiritual disciplines (of which prayer was the preeminent example) for the divine

activity of the operation of grace. In short, Hausherr denounced the Messalians as the Pelagians of the east.<sup>44</sup>

With its constant insistence on one's active demonstration of love for others as that which decides one's spiritual condition, would not the *Liber Graduum* deserve Hausherr's accusation? Depending on how one approaches the term "Pelagian," the answer might be yes. If one accepts as Pelagian the idea that salvation depends on a cooperation of divine grace and human effort, then it is guilty of this soteriological error. Although the author of the *Liber Graduum* never spoke of the exact relationship between divine grace and human effort in salvation, he did believe that one's service to God and other human beings would comprise a central component in one's standing on the day of judgment. Sermon 10, paragraph 2 states that "nothing goes with us out of this world except the good we have done." Yet according to this definition, one could accuse most of the great theologians of the eastern church (and many of the west) with Pelagianism. Gregory of Nyssa, speaking of the necessity of performing one's vow to God before approaching God in prayer, said "thus, when we have accomplished our part, we are confident of being

made worthy to receive in turn the things which are God's to give."<sup>45</sup> And Diadochus of Photice, a theologian and monastic on whom Hausherr relied as an anti-Messalian source (due to his discussion of the relation of sin and grace in the soul after baptism), said that "human beings become good through moral effort and grace when they transform themselves into that which they are not, so that the soul...unites itself to God to the degree that it desires to do so and works [at it]."<sup>46</sup> The *Liber Graduum* is no exception to this rule.

But in the final sense the answer to whether Hausherr's charge of Pelagianism applies to the *Liber Graduum* must be no. Paragraph 18 of sermon 5 demonstrates the priority of God's grace when it says that "the Paraclete comes [even though] one is not capable of this [gift], nor able to receive it." In certain passages throughout this text, the author spoke of reception of the Paraclete as the final goal of one's pilgrimage along the way of perfection. This passage indicates that, although one seeks perfection through a particular relation to God and other human beings, the achievement of this goal rests finally on God's gift of the grace of the Holy Spirit, and not on one's own merit.

4. The coming of the Holy Spirit and *apatheia* as the result of the demon's expulsion

As the previous paragraph has pointed out, the author of the *Liber Graduum* did link spiritual maturity with the reception of the Holy Spirit. Would this not correspond to the supposed Messalian insistence that, upon the success of prayer in driving the demon out of the soul, God rewarded one with the gift of the Holy Spirit? To make a case for this one would have to overcome certain important differences between the *Liber Graduum's* teaching on the reception of the Holy Spirit and that of which the anti-Messalians accused their opponents.

One of these differences lay in the fact that, according to the council of Constantinople, reception of the Holy Spirit came as a sudden experience, bringing an immediate release from the passions and end to the need for the disciplines of the body.<sup>47</sup> Yet the *Liber Graduum* teaches that reception of the Holy Spirit, like progress along the way of perfection, is a gradual experience. Sermon 5, paragraph 18, speaking of Peter and Paul and the growth of the power of the Spirit in them, says that "those who receive the Paraclete increase more and more in it until the day they leave this world."

The council of Ephesus included in its list of those Messalian errors which revolve around the reception of the Holy Spirit the claim that at any given time "Satan and the Holy Spirit both dwell in [the same] human being."<sup>48</sup> Diadochus of Photice included in his *One Hundred Gnostic Chapters* a discussion of the dual habitation of sin and grace in the soul after baptism, and this accounts for his reputation as an opponent of Messalianism.<sup>49</sup> On the basis of the ascription of this doctrine to the Messalians, Antoine Guillaumont contended that the presence of this idea in non-heretical form in the *Liber Graduum* demonstrated a similarity between this text and Messalianism.<sup>50</sup>

Possibly more than any of the alleged Messalian ideas covered so far, one can argue that this one applies to the *Liber Graduum*. Sermon 15, paragraph 16 says that those who have not arrived at perfection possess the "intermingling of the Holy Spirit." Contained in this phrase is the idea is that with perfection comes the plenitude of the Spirit, and that as one progresses toward perfection one receives ever-greater degrees of this "intermingling."<sup>51</sup> Might not this particular theological idea point toward the Messalian doctrine of the cohabitation of the demon and the Holy Spirit in the



soul? One cannot conclusively charge the author of the *Liber Graduum* with holding to this doctrine, due to the impossibility of answering a simple question: with what is the Holy Spirit mingled, according to this text? With a demon? With Satan? With sin? The text provides no answer. The best interpretation would be to find here further explication of the text's notion of the gradual reception of the Holy Spirit in accord with one's spiritual progress.

#### 5. Refusal to work

With the contention that the Messalians refused to engage in manual labor one arrives at the one accusation which all the later lists of Messalian errors shared with that of Epiphanius. It is as well the most serious one for the *Liber Graduum*, for one cannot question that the way of perfection as this text envisions it precludes manual labor. Most of the third sermon centers around the author's insistence that those seeking perfection cannot engage themselves in the "give and take" of human commerce. Paragraph 8 says "For those who take up their cross and teach the word are not able to take from this one and give to that one, nor buy nor sell. Nor even are

they able to bear their own burden, unless they receive charity." "Taking up the cross" of the search for perfection necessarily meant finding sustenance either through the charity of others or by "living off the land," rather than by one's own labor.

With rejection of manual labor as the one tenet which all the anti-Messalian sources, including Epiphanius, charge to their opponents, does not the undeniable inclusion of this idea in the author's understanding of the monastic lifestyle constitute a strong indication of the Messalian character of this text? The answer lies in three places: first, in the *Liber Graduum's* teaching on the law of *kinutha* (righteousness) which God gave to humanity after the fall; second, in a review of certain differences between Syrian and Egyptian monasticism; and finally, in the text's distinction between ministering to the poor by the use of one's own material goods or by becoming poor oneself.

Prior to the fall, Adam and Eve lived in Paradise according to the law of perfection (*gamirutha*). Yet with the fall God gave them a second, lesser law by which to live: the law of righteousness (*kinutha*). This law centered around the needs of the earthly life which they

had chosen. One of the main prescriptions of the law of righteousness was to work to provide for one's own sustenance, as well as that of others: "God commanded him [Adam] that he should labor in these earthly things, and give alms" says sermon 19, paragraph 13. Adam and Eve had given up the "life of the angels" for the things of this earth; the law of *kinutha* told them how they were to conduct themselves while working to get those things.

Those who seek to follow the way of perfection must reverse the process of the fall; they must free themselves from earthly things and seek to live according to that higher law of perfection which God gave to Adam and Eve before they fell. Part of the process of liberating oneself from bondage to the things of earth lay in re-creating Adam's original state by following Christ's commandment to give up one's anxiety over what one would wear and eat. "Our Lord said 'do not be anxious for your body, for what you will wear, nor for yourself, for how you will be clothed.' How will one be able to take up the cross and obey without being anxious if one bears a burden in these visible things?" asks sermon 3, paragraph 8. For the author of the *Liber Graduum*, working to provide for these needs constituted

indisputable evidence of being anxious for them, which in turn constituted an inability to pursue the way of perfection.

If one was not to be anxious for one's own food and clothing, who was? God, obviously. Such an answer would seem to manifest quite well that naivete which Epiphanius and his successors ascribed to the Messalians. Yet the author of this text was not so naive as to claim that God would meet these needs without claiming to know how God would do so. Rather, the text explains that God has ordained a very definite means of caring for those who sought perfection. Just as refusing to be anxious as to how one was to obtain one's food and clothing constituted part of the law of *gamirutha*, so the command to meet the needs of these "*gamirē*" (perfect ones) belonged to the "lesser way" of *kinutha*:

It is fitting for them [those who follow *gamirutha*] to live like the angels, imitating them and proclaiming the word; for our Lord commanded them that they should not be anxious for food or clothing...for our Lord looks after his own, and after every person. For he is concerned for all of his creation, and by the hands of the righteous ones [those following the law of *kinutha*] provides for the needy.

From the context of this passage, one can see that the "needy" to whom the author directed the charity of the "righteous ones" included those who had taken on poverty as part of their search for perfection.

Epiphanius and his successors knew that the Messalians used their reliance on the alms of other Christians to justify their refusal to work. Yet this did not clear them of the charge of idleness. As anyone familiar with the traditions of Egyptian monasticism knew, the work of prayer (for which the Messalians were supposedly keeping themselves free by not engaging in manual labor) went on while one worked with one's hands. A story in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* concerning an encounter between the abba Lucius and some Euchites (the Greek equivalent of the term "Messalian") well illustrates this conviction:

Some monks called Euchites, or "men of prayer," once came to Abba Lucius in the ninth region of Alexandria. And the old man asked them: "What do you do with your hands?" And they said: "We do not work with our hands. We obey St. Paul's command and pray without ceasing." The old man said to them: "Do you not eat?" They said: "Yes, we eat." And the old man said to them: "When you are eating, who prays for you?" Again, he asked them: "Do you not sleep?" They said: "We sleep." And the old man said: "Who prays for you while you are asleep?" They would not answer him. And he said to them: "Forgive me brothers, but you do not practice what you say. I will show you how I pray without ceasing, though I work with my hands. With God's

help I sit and collect a few palm-leaves and plait them, and say: 'Have mercy on me, O God, after thy great mercy: and according to the multitude of thy mercies, do away with mine iniquity.'" And he said to them: "Is that prayer, or is it not?" They said: "It is prayer." And he said: "When I stay all day working and praying in my heart, I make about sixteen pence. Two of these I put outside the door, and with the rest I buy food. And he who receives the two pennies outside the door, prays for me while I am eating and sleeping: and so by God's grace I fulfill the text: 'Pray without ceasing.'"<sup>52</sup>

For Abba Lucius, the work of the hands did not preclude continual prayer, but rather facilitated it. Yet this story reflects an Egyptian understanding of the place of labor in the monastic lifestyle which can prove misleading when one is discussing Syrian monastics. As Peter Brown has so aptly pointed out, although both groups considered the "desert" or "wilderness" the necessary setting for their separation from normal types of society, these terms had far different meanings for the monastics of Egypt and of Syria.<sup>53</sup> The desert constituted the one inescapable fact of the Egyptian monastics' lives. It provided the perfect barrier for persons wishing to disentangle themselves from those societal obligations which distracted one from the service of God. This is not to say that no commerce took place between the monastics and the villages on the fringe of the Egyptian desert; obviously, the story of

Lucius indicates otherwise. But it does mean that they could not gain their sustenance from the overflow of the economic life of their village neighbors; separation by the desert prevented it. Rather, they had to emulate the townspeoples' self-sufficient means of providing for their own sustenance. They developed their own primitive economy, usually the weaving of baskets, so as to be able to provide for themselves when they did take the initiative to go into town.

The situation in Syria differed considerably. The separation of town and wilderness was far less well-defined, not being marked by such an imposing boundary as the Egyptian desert. The lack of such a geographical barrier imposing a particular form of economic life on them freed the monastics of Syria to find their sustenance on either side of this fluid boundary between civilization and wilderness. On one side stood the Edessan anchorites eating roots and berries while living in the caves surrounding Ephrem's city.<sup>54</sup> On the other stood the monastics of Theodoret's *Historia Religiosa*, who received alms and food in response to their assistance in solving the difficulties, both spiritual

and temporal, of the life of the village.<sup>55</sup> In both cases the monastics of Syria found ways to sustain themselves which did not involve regular manual labor.

Further, other voices within the Syriac-speaking monastic tradition expressed views concerning manual labor similar to that of the *Liber Graduum*. Isaac of Nineveh, a seventh-century Nestorian bishop who left his episcopal position to take up the monastic life, also believed that those dwelling in the desert were to occupy themselves with tasks other than working for their physical sustenance. Quoting (ironically) from one of the great figures of Egyptian monasticism, he said "Manual labor is called by Evagrius an impediment to the recollection of God. The Fathers have prescribed work to the indigent and despondent, not to those who are zealous to perform their legal commandment."<sup>56</sup>

The work of the hands as a monastic virtue corresponded better to the economic situation of the Egyptian monastics than it did their Syrian counterparts. I would suggest that Epiphanius and the other anti-Messalians evaluated their opponents' attitude toward manual labor according to an Egyptian standard, by which most of the monastics of Syria (including the community of the *Liber Graduum*) would be found wanting.



A final word on the subject of work and the *Liber Graduum*: although the text does claim that working to provide one's own sustenance does not belong to the way of perfection, it does not do so out of concern that work takes one away from continual prayer. Rather, this claim arose from the author's conviction that engaging in human commerce produced anxiety, rendering one incapable of those relational virtues upon which perfection rested.

Rather than discuss the issue of manual labor in terms of working to provide for one's own welfare, the *Liber Graduum* most often deals with whether one should engage in distributing one's possessions to meet the needs of the poor. For those following the lesser commandments of *kinutha*, the answer is unquestionably yes. As we have seen, part of the responsibilities of *kinutha* lay in meeting the needs of those whom economic hardship and voluntary renunciation had left in poverty.

Yet for those seeking perfection, the answer must be no. Distributing material goods to those in need necessarily involves one in the give and take of human commerce, of which the author asked in sermon 3, paragraph 2 "now, have those who have been involved in the destructiveness and anxiety of this world indeed been

made perfect?" Working to provide for the things of this world produces an anxiety which necessarily distracts one from the search for perfection.

Does this indicate a type of privatism on the part of the author, in which one ignores all earthly distractions, including finally other people, in order to engage in "spiritual" pursuits? No, because the author did not worry that this anxiety would distract one from monitoring one's own spiritual condition, but rather from actively demonstrating forgiveness, acceptance, and love to other human beings. Sermon 8 makes this point by setting up a tension between two passages of scripture: on the one hand stands Jesus' statement that those who have ministered to the bodily needs of others have done so to him, and will be blessed accordingly. On the other stands Paul's claim that selling all to feed the poor is meaningless without love.<sup>57</sup> Concerning this tension, paragraph 2 asks: "Do the words of the apostle negate those of our Lord? Heaven forbid! They do not negate them, but rather build on them." There follows an explanation of the difference between ministering to the needs of the poor through the use of one's possessions and humbly loving and forgiving others while being oneself poor:

Now there are those who give all that they have in order to feed the poor, as our Lord commanded them. Yet they do not have that humility which leads them to love their murderers, wash the feet of their enemies, and consider all others better than themselves. Neither do they fix their thoughts on that which is in heaven and not on this earth, nor serve in their minds in that Jerusalem which is above, being bound there to our Lord. They do not come to those who are lower than themselves, bowing their heads before them, so that their humility is known to all. When others curse them, they do not bless them in return, nor do they bow themselves to those who beat them. They do not treat those who have stripped them as if they had given them clothing, nor do they come before those who have done them harm as though they had been kind to them. These are not the ones who know the height and depth and width and breadth and are more humble than all others. Nor are they those who, when they have done all these things and others like them, consider sinners better than themselves and, having no care for the [necessities of] the day do not allow their minds to rest on the things of this world. This is not to say that those who sell all they have to feed the poor have no reward. But there is a difference in the eyes [of God] between them and those who, renouncing everything, possess that love which accomplishes all these things in humility. Now some are able to feed the needy through the use of their possessions in the name of our Lord without arriving at this humility, but rather love only as they are loved, and humble themselves to certain persons, and not all. Yet on account of this they occupy a considerably lesser position than those who have arrived at this complete love. For this reason those who have not humbled themselves will not be made perfect.<sup>58</sup>

In this particular instance, Jesus' statement belonged to the "lesser commandments" of *kinutha*; those who lived according to this commandment would find salvation in it. Yet Paul had spoken of the higher way, in which love for

others must be the objective. For the author of the *Liber Graduum*, such complete love could only come when one had freed oneself of the anxieties of normal types of human commerce.

### Conclusions

What then of the *Liber Graduum* and this list of Messalian doctrines? A review of the list reveals the error of referring to the *Liber Graduum* as a Messalian text, and this fact provides further reason to question whether this set of theological ideas characterized Messalianism at all. Of these doctrines, the text knows nothing of two (the inhabitation of a demon in every human soul and the sole efficacy of prayer in removing the demon), and strongly opposes another (the devaluation of the church and its sacraments). The "intermingling of the Holy Spirit" sounds like one of these "Messalian" distinctives, yet the absence of any reference to that with which the Holy Spirit mingles renders this an inadequate criterion for judging the Messalian nature of the *Liber Graduum* as well. Only the abandonment of manual labor as a means of supporting oneself appears in the *Liber Graduum*. Yet it is not present in the naive

form which Epiphanius described, nor does it primarily refer to a rejection of labor for the purpose of pursuing constant prayer. Further, doubt exists as to whether this criterion holds value for evaluating Syrian, rather than Egyptian, monastics at all. On the basis of these considerations, one must conclude that one cannot refer to the *Liber Graduum* as a Messalian text, and that the text provides strong evidence indicating the inappropriateness of considering this set of doctrines characteristic of the Messalians' beliefs.

# ENDNOTES

1. I. Hausherr, "L'erreur fondamentale et la logique du Messalianisme," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 1 (1935), 328.

2. Jean Gribomont, "Le dossier des origines du Messalianisme," in *Epektasis: Melanges patristique offerts au Cardinal Jean Daniélou*, ed. by Jacques Fontaine and Charles Kanengiesser (Paris, 1972), 611.

3. Kmosko claimed that with its teachings on a "principle of concupiscence" as the root of sin and the importance of prayer and other spiritual disciplines in combating concupiscence, the *Liber Graduum* prefigured the later Messalian doctrines of the indwelling demon as the cause of sin and the sole efficacy of prayer in removing the demon; Preface to *Liber Graduum* (Paris, 1926), cxv-cxlix.

4. Studies of the *Liber Graduum's* relation to Messalianism fall into one of three categories; those affirming the Messalian character of the text, those denying it, and those claiming that it bears some similarity to Messalianism while not fully embodying the Messalian teachings. Into the first of these falls I. Hausherr's work, which claims (contrary to Kmosko) that the *Liber Graduum* contains a later, more sophisticated expression of the Messalian heresy; "Quanam aetate prodierit *Liber Graduum*," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 1 (1935), 496-502. See also "L'erreur," P. 355. Arthur Vööbus represents the second category, in that he flatly denied that the *Liber Graduum* contains an explicit statement of any of Hausherr's list of Messalian distinctives; "*Liber Graduum*: Some Aspects of its Significance for the History of Early Syrian Asceticism," *Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile* 7 (1954), 108-128. See also his *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, CSCO, vols 184 & 197 (1958-1960), II:70-79. The final category describes Antoine Guillaumont's contention that the Messalian insistence on the cohabitation of a demon and the Holy Spirit in the soul grew out of a spatial understanding of the relationship of sin and grace in the soul such as one

finds in the *Liber Graduum*; "Situation et signification du *Liber Graduum* dans la spiritualité syriaque," *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 197 (1974), 311-325.

5. Ephrem Syrus, *Hymnen contra Haereses*, 22, in Edmund Beck, ed. *Ephrem des Syrsers Hymnen contra Haereses*, in *CSCO*, vol. 76 (1957), 79. The set of anti-Messalian sources on which this study will draw begins with this text, and runs through the canons of the ecumenical council of Ephesus in 431. Although the theological controversy with Messalianism continued well into the seventh century, I will restrict my examination to this group of fourth and fifth-century texts for two reasons: First, because the date of the *Liber Graduum*'s composition probably falls within this period, making it contemporary with that form of Messalianism familiar to the authors of these anti-Messalian documents. And second, because all subsequent orthodox discussions of Messalianism relied heavily on these sources for their knowledge of the heresy, particularly that of the council of Ephesus.

6. Hermann Dörries, "Urteil und Verurteilung: Ein Beitrag zum Umgang der Alten Kirche mit Häeretikern," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 55 (1964), 79.

7. Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion* 80, *GCS*, vol 37, ed. by Karl Holl (Leipzig, 1933), 484-496.

8. *Ibid.*, par. 3.

9. The main source of knowledge of this council is Theodoret, *Haereticarum fabularum compendium* IV, 11; *MG* 83: 335-356, as well as Photius, *Bibliotheca* cod. 52; *MG* 103: 87-92.

10. The Greek here is *ta protera*; Theodoret offered no explanation of this term.

11. Timothy, a sixth-century presbyter in Constantinople, copied the proceedings of this council in a chapter on Messalianism in his *De iis qui ad ecclesiam accedunt*, *MG* 136: 45-52.

12. *Ibid.*, proposition 1.

13. " , proposition 5.

14. " , proposition 6.

15. For the text of the Council of Ephesus' condemnation of the Messalians, see E. Schwartz, ed., *Acta Consiliorum Oecumenicorum* (Berlin, 1922-1930), I: 1, 7, p. 117. English translation, *NPNF* second series, 14:240.

16. Photius, par. 4.

17. John of Damascus's *De Haeresibus Compendio*, ch. 80 (Kmosko, ccxxx-ccxl) contains excerpts of the *Asceticon* (which formed the primary basis for Louis Villecourt's identification of this Messalian handbook and the Macarian homilies; "La date et l'origine des 'homélies spirituelles' attribuées à Macaire," in *Comptes rendus des seances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (Paris, 1920), 250-258). The statement *phusei ta kaka* comes in proposition 13.

18. The text of Cyril's letter appears on pp. clxxxv-clxxxviii of Kmosko's introduction to the *Liber Graduum*.

19. Villecourt, 250.

20. Dörries, "Urteil," 85-86.

21. Ser. 12, par. 2. The translation is that of Robert Murray in *Symbols of Church and Kingdom; A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (London, 1975), 265. All subsequent translations are my own.

22. Ser. 28, par. 8.

23. For instance, Evagrius' *Praktikos* and *Chapters on Prayer* never mention the church. Further, Ephrem's long descriptions of the Edessan anchorites in his sermon "Concerning the Solitaries and Monks" include no reference to their attendance at church.

24. The best demonstration of this fact can be found in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, which places its monastics in church often, yet seldom considers it necessary to explain why they are there.

25. Ser. 30, par. 4.



26. Isaac of Ninevah, a seventh-century Syrian monastic theologian, displayed a similar attitude to the incompatibility of the monastic life and ecclesiastical office when he referred to himself as one who "repented in the desert of being a bishop." P. Bedjan, ed., *Mar Isaacus Niniwita de perfectione religiosa* (Paris, 1909), 553.

27. The *Apophthegmata Patrum* contains a story of a monastic who converted a well-known Manichean priest to orthodoxy through the monastic's willing acceptance of the heretic into his cell; Owen Chadwick, *Western Asceticism* (Philadelphia, 1958), 146-147.

28. Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV, 10. (NPNF series 2, 3:114-115).

29. Ibid.

30. Theodoret continued in the next paragraph to criticize the Messalians for their hypocrisy, excoriating them for their willingness to deny their adherence to the heretical group and denounce their colleagues.

31. Villecourt, 123.

32. Dörries, *Die Theologie des Makarios/Symeon* (Göttingen, 1978), 14.

33. Kmosko, cxv-cxlix.

34. Ibid, clxxii-ccxcci. This compilation has been one of the *Liber Graduum's* most important features in the minds of many scholars. Even studies which show little or no interest in the content of the *Liber Graduum* itself make much use of Kmosko's assembly of anti-Messalian sources.

35. I. Hausherr, *Quanam aetate prodierit Liber Graduum*, "Orientalia Christiana Periodica 1 (1935), 496-502.

36. Hausherr, "Messalianisme," 335.

37. Cf. for instance Pierre Canivet, "Theodoret et le Messalianisme," *Revue Mabillon* 51 (1961), 26-34;
38. Arthur Vööbus, "Liber Graduum: Some Aspects of its Significance for the History of Early Syrian Asceticism," *Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile* 7 (1954), 108-128. See also his *HASO*, II:70-79.
39. In his earliest article on Messalianism, Guillaumont held to the idea that one could call the *Liber Graduum* a Messalian text; "Les Messaliens," in *Mystique et Contenance* (Paris, 1952), 131-138. In later studies, however, he denied that this text reflects the Messalian teachings; see his "Les 'arrhes de l'Esprit' dans le Livre des degrés," in *Memorial Mgr. Gabriel Khouri-Sarkhis* (Louvain, Imprimerie Orientale, 1969), 107-113; "Situation et signification du *Liber Graduum* dans la spiritualité syriaque," *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 197 (Rome, 1974), 311-325; "Liber Graduum" *Dict Sp* 9:749-754; "Messaliens," *Dict Sp* 9:1074-1083.
40. Guillaumont, "Situation," 315-316.
41. Vööbus stands particularly guilty of this, considering his own strongly-worded denial of the presence of the Messalian doctrines in the *Liber Graduum* sufficient evidence to convince the reader of the truth of his claims.
42. The *Liber Graduum's* position on the issue of temptation and sin bears resemblance to par. 42 of Athanasius's *Life of Antony*, in which the Old Man, speaking of the demons and their temptations, says "when they come, their actions correspond to the condition in which they find us." (In *Athanasius: The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, ed. and trans. by Robert C. Gregg, in *CWS* (1980), 63.
43. Hausherr, "Messalianisme," 338.
44. *Ibid.*, 328.
45. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Lord's Prayer*, ed. and tran. Hilda C. Graef, in *ACW*, vol. 18 (1954), p. 37.

46. Diadochus of Photice, *One Hundred Gnostic Chapters*, ch.2. Ed. and tran. by Edward des Places, in *SC*, vol. 5 (1955), p.85.
47. Timothy of Constantinople, proposition 4.
48. John of Damascus, proposition 3.
49. Diadochus, chs. 76-88.
50. Guillamont, "Situation," 320-321. See the discussion of Guillamont's views on pp. 53-54 above.
51. See ser. 3, par. 14, which speaks of the increase of the intermingling of the Holy Spirit.
52. Owen Chadwick, *Western Asceticism* (Philadelphia, 1958), 142-143.
53. Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," in *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*, (Berkeley, 1982), 109-115.
54. See especially Ephrem's hymn "To the Solitaries, Hermits, and Monastics" in Edmund Beck, ed., *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermones IV*, CSCO vol. 334 (1973), 16-28.
55. An example is the monastic Salamanes, who lived by a village and received his food from the villagers once a year through a hole in the bottom of his hut; *Historia Religiosa*, ed. and tran. R. M. Price (Kalamazoo, 1985), 129-130.
56. Isaac of Nineveh, 57.
57. Matthew 10:42 and I Cor. 13:3, respectively.
58. Ser. 8, pars. 2-3.

CHAPTER 3:  
THE *LIBER GRADUUM* AND SYRIAN MONASTICISM

Peter Brown has said that one should turn to the monastics of Syria if one is looking for the "great stars" of renunciation and self-discipline in the fourth and fifth-century Mediterranean world.<sup>1</sup> According to the common understanding of Syrian monasticism which this statement reflects, the monastics of the Syriac-speaking areas viewed self-denial and isolation from others as the principal tasks in the monastic quest for perfection. Unlike monasticism in Egypt, whose reputation rested on great coenobitic communities such as those of Pachomius, one remembers Syrian monasticism for austere, extravagant solitaires such as Simeon Stylites. Of all the branches of the early monastic movement, that of Syria has distinguished itself as the most individualistic and ascetical.<sup>2</sup>

Most previous scholarship concerning the *Liber Graduum* has seen in it an example of this tendency in Syrian monasticism toward a life of rigorous self-denial. Arthur Vööbus believed that the perfection of which the text speaks so often involved primarily celibacy and self-mortification.<sup>3</sup> One of the most recent discussions

of the *Liber Graduum*, that of Jean Gribomont, characterizes this text as an expression of the Syrian tradition of wandering, isolated ascetics.<sup>4</sup> These studies have assumed that, since self-denial and individualism stood at the center of the Syrian monastics' understanding of their vocation, and since the *Liber Graduum* is a monastic document which arose from within Syriac-speaking Christianity, it follows that the monastic spirituality of this text would revolve around these concerns as well.

The purpose of this chapter will be to reexamine this assumption, as well as the broader premise concerning fourth and fifth-century Syrian monasticism on which it rests. While discipline of the body and separation from normal types of society did hold importance for the author's vision of the monastic life, they had no final value in themselves; they were important only in that they facilitated the relational virtues of forgiveness and reconciliation with other human beings which comprised the fundamental activities of the way of perfection. The ascetical, individualistic model of monastic life in late-antique Syria and

Mesopotamia cannot apply to the *Liber Graduum* due to its insistence that the relational virtues stand at the center of of the monastic way.

This fact in turn calls for a reconsideration of this characterization of Syrian monasticism itself. I will suggest two reasons why the individualistic, ascetical model is an insufficient foundation on which to build one's knowledge of monastic life among Syriac-speaking Christians: First, because the authors of those texts on which it rests, Ephrem and Theodoret, described their subject from an outsider's perspective; neither were themselves practicing monastics. This means that their works cannot provide the same kind of insight into the Syrian monastics' own understanding of their vocation as that of the monastics themselves. Second, because alongside their descriptions of the self-mortification and solitude of their subjects, even Ephrem and especially Theodoret evidenced an awareness of the importance of the relational virtues in the monastic life. When one remembers as well that the *Liber Graduum*, a text arising from within Syrian monasticism, made the relational virtues central to the search for perfection, then one realizes that the ascetical, individualistic

model was not the only one according to which the monastics of Syria proceeded along the way of their particular Christian pilgrimage.

#### Recent scholarship concerning Syrian monasticism

The thesis that self-mortification and isolation stood at the heart of Syrian monasticism owes its prevalence among scholars more to Arthur Vööbus than to anyone else. Vööbus claimed that asceticism (by which he meant various acts of physical self-denial arising out of a generally negative attitude toward the body) constituted the chief characteristic of Syriac-speaking Christianity. A good example of this most prominent aspect of Vööbus's work is a monograph in which he argued that up to the fourth century the Syrian baptismal liturgy contained an obligatory vow of celibacy.<sup>5</sup> He contended that the institution of monasticism merely extended and intensified the ascetical bent already inherent among the Christians of Syria and Mesopotamia. He further insisted that anchoritism stood at the heart of the peculiarly Syrian understanding of monastic life, and that even when coenobitic monasteries began to spring up in the Syriac-speaking areas, it was due to the

monastics' desire to lessen the physical demands of the anchoritic life, rather than to live in community in order to facilitate the practice of the communal virtues.<sup>6</sup> With a fine-tuned sense of the bizarre Vööbus described the early Syrian monastics as rustic solitaires living in the wilderness with only roots and spring water for sustenance, animals for company, and mud for clothing.<sup>7</sup>

Peter Brown's essay "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity" demonstrated that the solitude of the Syrian monastics was not so complete as Vööbus had believed.<sup>8</sup> Brown's central thesis was that the monastic "holy men and women" of Syria had considerable impact on the spiritual and temporal affairs of rural Syrian society by functioning, on a supernatural level, in the late-antique role of village patron. His decisive move beyond Vööbus was the recognition that these Syrian monastics did not completely maintain their ideal of total separation from society, but rather engaged frequently in the affairs of the village. Yet Brown did not challenge the ascetical and individualistic model of Syrian monasticism by suggesting that such activity on the part of the monastics represented a desire to minister to the needs of other human beings as



part of their monastic vocation. Rather, he relied on this model to say that, because of their conspicuous acts of self-mortification, the monastics of Syria had placed themselves outside the bounds of normal human society and relationships; they had made themselves "strangers" on this earth. Due to the disinterest and objectivity which such a condition produced, they became uniquely qualified to intercede for the villagers with the supernatural order as well as settle disputes over temporal affairs. Brown spoke of this as a role which the monastics occupied; he did not delve into their motivation for doing so. By thus failing to pursue the Syrian monastics' own understanding of the purpose within their broader search for perfection of this intercessory activity, he allowed an opportunity to re-evaluate the ascetical and individualistic understanding of Syrian monasticism to go unattended.

The British scholar Sebastian Brock has written an excellent introductory article concerning monasticism in the early Syrian church in which he pointed out that, while coenobitism was the *forte* of Egyptian monasticism, the solitary anchorite dominated the scene in Syria.<sup>9</sup> As reason for this Brock pointed to separateness as the fundamental Syrian understanding of the monastic life.

Drawing on the fourth-century Persian theologian Aphrahat's sermon "To the Monastics," he noted that the later monastic term *qadisha*, which literally means "holy one," was in an earlier usage a technical expression for anyone who had voluntarily given up marriage for a celibate lifestyle. Brock claimed that one should not be surprised that the idea of holiness should take on such a restricted meaning, because the Semitic root verb *qds* (from which the Syriac *qadisha* derives) means "to separate." Thus, the act of separating oneself from one's spouse symbolized these Syrian ascetics' separation from the world and human society. According to Brock, the glorification of the isolated, anchoritic lifestyle among Syrian monastics grew out of this particular understanding of the meaning of celibacy.

A. J. Festugiere focused his examination of the characteristic traits of the Syrian monastics on their approach to the subjugation of the body.<sup>10</sup> Drawing principally on Theodoret's *Historia Religiosa*, he pointed out that the different forms of Syrian anchoritism (the two most common of which were spending all of one's life in a very small, enclosed cell or living completely exposed to the elements) all revolved around mortification of the body. He also noted that the

monastics of Syria often added to the natural burden which this rustic lifestyle placed on their bodies by wearing iron chains, a practice frowned upon in Egypt. All of these expressions of the anchoritic life point to a common desire to overcome the desires of the body through rigorous forms of self-denial. The bottom line for the spirituality of these Syrian monastics, according to Festugiere, was bringing the body under the control of the spirit; only by doing so could one succeed in one's quest for perfection.

Ephrem, Theodoret, and the *Liber Graduum*  
on the individualistic, ascetical model  
of early Syrian monasticism.

Certain common elements appear in all of these studies of Syrian monasticism, one of which is an emphasis on solitude and excessive acts of self-mortification as particularly characteristic of this branch of the early monastic movement. Another is their common reliance on two sets of late-fourth and early-fifth century sources: a group of sermons and hymns by Ephrem, one of the most notable theologians and ecclesiastics of the Syriac-speaking tradition; and the

*Historia Religiosa*, Theodoret of Cyrrhus's history of the monks of Syria. To understand how Syria gained this reputation as home to the extremists of the early monastic movement, one must first look at what Ephrem and Theodoret had to say on the importance of two issues for the Syrian monastics' understanding of their vocation: the subjugation of the body through fasting and other physical disciplines; and isolation from other human beings. A comparison of the *Liber Graduum*'s teaching on these issues with those of Ephrem and Theodoret will then demonstrate that the ascetical, individualistic picture of Syrian monasticism which the latter two present cannot characterize the author of the *Liber Graduum*'s vision of the monastic way.

Several of Ephrem's hymns, including those he addressed to the monastics Julian Saba and Abraham Qidunaya, contain brief references to the demanding self-denial of the Syrian monastics.<sup>11</sup> His most complete picture of the rigorous lifestyle of the individuals he so admired, however, appears in his sermon entitled "To the solitaires, hermits, and monastics."<sup>12</sup> Written during the 370's, this sermon tells us that its subjects, the Edessan anchorites, engaged in a particularly austere form of the monastic life because "those who love the

future do not immerse themselves in visible things."<sup>13</sup>  
 It further explains that "they plague their bodies, not because they ought not to love them, but because they wish to restore their bodies to the glory of Eden."<sup>14</sup>  
 Ephrem thus gave both a backward and a forward-looking purpose to the the self-imposed hardships of his subjects; in seeking to recreate in themselves Adam's condition from the past as a preparation for the future, these anchorites considered it necessary to accept a primitive and punishing life in the present.

The chief characteristic of this life as Ephrem described it was an attempt, not only to deprive one's body of comfort, but to go out of one's way to make life as uncomfortable as possible. Verses 56-96 present a vivid picture of this rustic lifestyle:

They are human beings, with the garment of flesh like us,  
 and out of love for God they have gone out like animals in the wilderness.  
 They had relatives and families, houses, possessions, and riches;  
 and they have considered them nothing in order to gain the kingdom which is above.  
 They wander in the wilderness, in order not to be stained with sin;  
 they go out like animals, that they might be deemed worthy of the bridal chamber of joy.  
 Instead of delicacies they eat grass and roots, and instead of high chambers they live in lowly holes.  
 They have risen up on high like birds, yet they make their dwelling on rocks.

Of them the prophet has pronounced  
"From the tops of mountains they will call out."  
Instead of on beds they have stretched themselves on  
the lowly ground,  
and instead of soft couches they lay their heads on  
stones.  
At mealtime, instead of on tables they set the herbs  
they use for food on their knees.  
Their drink is neither wine nor water,  
and instead of oil and salve one finds mud on their  
bodies.  
Instead of silk they are clothed in rough garments,  
or go about unclothed,  
and instead of good shoes they are barefooted.  
Rather than human beings they see only animals,  
and instead of their relatives only angels come to  
them.

Elsewhere the sermon's description of the Edessan  
anchorites borders on the bizarre; it says that they are  
burdened with the weight of their own long hair, and that  
their bodies are afflicted because they lie in mud and  
straw.<sup>15</sup> Such oddities demonstrate Ephrem's belief that  
the monastic life involves a constant struggle against  
the pull of one's physical nature: "And so they crucify  
the body in the struggle against the desires of the  
world, and by means of afflictions of every kind they  
daily scourge their bodies."<sup>16</sup>

Of equal importance with self-mortification in the  
monastic way was isolation from other human beings.  
Ephrem's anchorites lived in the wilderness, not only  
because it offered opportunity to inconvenience the  
desires of the body, but also because it removed them

from society: "The desert, frightening for its barrenness, has become for them a city. In it their harps sound, and by it they are preserved from harm."<sup>17</sup>

Verses 201-212 state that the desert represents the solitude which is the deep desire of the monastic:

[Some] make vows to see no human beings,  
and go to the barren desert to be alone with  
themselves.  
They follow the road in a clever manner,  
in order to remain secret from all,  
because they love to be alone in the desert.  
Therefore, because they are alone,  
they remain shielded from evil,  
nor can one of them harm another by means of words.

These final lines indicate one of the principal reasons for the Syrian monastics' desire for solitude; it removed them from the possibility of sins such as anger which contact with others occasioned. Ephrem listed two advantages to the barren lands into which his subjects had gone: "they remain safe from sin, and from the shame of human beings."<sup>18</sup>

A later document, Theodoret of Cyrrhus's *Historia Religiosa*, further impresses one with the austere and excessive nature of the Syrian branch of the early monastic movement. This collection of short biographies reviewed the careers of certain notable Syrian monastics whose lives spanned the period from the mid-fourth century to the time of its composition in 440.<sup>19</sup> As

had his predecessor Ephrem, Theodoret constructed his narrative around the acts of self-mortification and the solitude of his monastic heroes.

And also as had Ephrem before him, Theodoret stood in awe of his subjects' accomplishments of self-denial. The purpose of the whole work, he explained at its beginning, was to extol the achievements of the Syrian monastics:

Therefore those who have followed the path of life through innumerable labors and broken the body in with sweat and toil, who have not experienced the passion of laughter but spent all their life in mourning and tears, who have deemed fasting Sybaritic nourishment, laborious vigil a most pleasant sleep, the hard resistance of the ground a soft couch, a life of prayer and psalmody a pleasure measureless and insatiable, these who have attained every virtue--who would not rightly admire them?<sup>20</sup>

As Pierre Canivet has pointed out, Theodoret employed the Hellenistic imagery of an athletic contest in describing the monastic life.<sup>21</sup> He wrote in order to praise his monastic "athletes" for their victories over the body in pursuit of the final prize, eternal life.

Theodoret's monastic heroes sought to control the desires of the body by a variety of means, including the most traditional one, fasting. Of Marcianus, one of the earliest of his subjects, Theodoret said "He had resolved to eat each day in the evening, and never to experience



satietty, but to be always hungry and always thirsty, supplying the body with the bare necessities of life."<sup>22</sup> Yet most notable about the self-mortification of the *Historia Religiosa's* monastics is their conviction that, rather than simply deny the body that which it wants, one should take steps to make one's corporeal existence even more difficult than it already is. To the more rudimentary disciplines of fasting and sleeping on the ground Theodosius added the wearing of chains around his neck, torso, and hands.<sup>23</sup> Thaleus constructed a cylindrical cage in which he could not even sit without bending his neck, suspended it in the air, and had been living in it for ten years at the time Theodoret gave an account of it.<sup>24</sup> And the great virtuoso of this type of renunciation, Symeon Stylites, underwent a period chained to a rock before he ascended the pillar on which he would spend almost forty years, making him the best-known Syrian monastic of his day, and ours as well.<sup>25</sup>

Another notable trait of Theodoret's Syrian monastics was their desire to avoid contact with other human beings, a goal which they accomplished by means either of wandering from place to place in deserted areas or imprisoning themselves in tiny cells. Macedonius

followed the former route, dwelling on the tops of high mountains and "not settling in one place, but now dwelling in this one and then transferring to that. This he did not through dislike of the places, but to escape the crowds of those who visited him and flocked from all sides."<sup>26</sup> The most perseverant of those employing the latter means of avoiding human contact was Acepsimas, who immured himself in a cell for sixty years, neither seeing nor speaking to anyone.<sup>27</sup> Even when circumstances made it impossible to avoid contact with others, Theodoret's subject's tried to act as though they were still alone, as the story of Salamanes demonstrates:

On another occasion the inhabitants of [Salamanes's] village of origin, crossing the bridge of the river by night and digging through his cell, seized and carried him, neither resisting nor ordering it, along to their own village, where at daybreak they built a similar hut, where they immediately immured him. He maintained silence as before, saying nothing to anyone. But after a few days the inhabitants of the village on the other side, also coming by night and digging through the cell, led him back to themselves, while he made no protest, neither struggling to remain nor returning back eagerly. Thus he had made himself totally dead to this life.<sup>28</sup>

Whatever importance Salamanes held to the inhabitants of both of these villages, clearly it was not as a conversationalist.

Unlike Ephrem, Theodoret did not recount the deeds solely of anchorites; several of the earliest coenobitic foundations in Syria find mention in his work as well. Yet the common life in these monasteries is always incidental to his account; it is the exploits of the founders and leaders of these monasteries *as individuals* which occupy the central position in his narrative. One of the earliest of these was Marcianus, whose monastery, established around 370, grew so quickly that it housed four hundred individuals by the time Theodoret composed his work.<sup>29</sup> Yet this fact receives only brief mention, while the stories of Marcianus's self-denial and miracles go on for several pages. In this way Theodoret's account furthers the impression of the individualistic character of Syrian monasticism, even when it describes monastics who did not live in isolation from one another.

The two principle sources of knowledge of Syrian monasticism in the fourth and fifth centuries, then, assess this branch of the early monastic movement in similar ways. Both portray (often extreme) forms of self-denial and isolation from other human beings as the principal tasks in these individuals' pilgrimage along the monastic way. From their descriptions derives the characterization of monasticism among Syriac-speaking

Christians as more individualistic and ascetical than its counterparts elsewhere in the fourth and fifth-century Mediterranean world.

Since the *Liber Graduum* is a Syriac text which arose from a monastic milieu, one would expect it to reflect a similar understanding of the monastic way of life. I would suggest, however, that such is not the case. By examining its teachings on the discipline of the body and separation from normal forms of human society, I hope to demonstrate that the individualistic, ascetical model cannot adequately describe the *Liber Graduum's* vision of the monastic life.

"I make my body a servant, bringing it into subjection and not giving it that which it wants;" so begins sermon 29, entitled "On the Subjugation of the Body." From such a statement one might assume that the *Liber Graduum* reflects the same attitude to the importance of self-denial in the monastic life as do the writings of Ephrem and Theodoret. And indeed, the text's author considered self-mortification an aid to achieving the final goal of eternal life just as they did. Yet a distinction of considerable significance exists between the two sets of texts as to whether self-denial is a primary or secondary means of reaching that goal. Ephrem

and Theodoret claimed that their monastic heroes denied themselves the comforts (and even necessities) of this life in order to gain the joys of the next. In that self-mortification involved exchanging the pleasures of earth for the delights of heaven it comprised the primary means of achieving that salvation which was the final goal of the monastic life.

Yet, for the author of the *Liber Graduum*, one attained that perfection which was the goal of the monastic life primarily through forgiveness, acceptance, and love of others; one engaged in the disciplines of self-denial because they freed one from concern with one's physical desires so that one might better attend to loving others. Discipline of the body was thus only a secondary means to monastic perfection. The author explained the subservience of self-denial to the relational virtues when he/she said

I control my body so that as a servant I might honor all human beings and stand before them asking peace of them, lowering myself to them. I do this also that I might be eager to come as a servant and do that which pleases my enemies, and to humble myself before those who are lesser than me.<sup>30</sup>

Unlike Ephrem and Theodoret, the author of the *Liber Graduum* did not consider denial of the body the decisive step in one's journey toward heaven, but rather something

preparatory to that step, which was itself love and forgiveness of one's neighbor.

As for the isolation and individualism of Ephrem and Theodoret's monastics, one finds no mention of it whatsoever in the *Liber Graduum*. While the text does assume that monastics would live apart from ordinary types of society, they did so to escape those societal obligations which left no time for the service of God and others, rather than to shun human company altogether. The societal obligation from which one needed most to separate was the need to support oneself by engaging in human commerce; Sermon 3, paragraph 14 says "Now no one receives the Paraclete as long as he is ... involved in giving and taking, and his mind is bound to this world."

Yet while the search for perfection required one to abandon involvement in "giving and taking," it by no means involved departure from association with others. On the contrary, the author's belief in the centrality to the way of perfection of concrete acts of forgiveness and reconciliation presupposed significant contact with one's fellow human beings. Sermon 16, paragraph 2 assumes that its readers would come into contact with others, and details how they were to relate to them:

Now when you meet others of the same age as yourself, you are to call them "my brother" and "my sister." Those younger than yourself you are to call "my son" and "my daughter;" those older, "my father" and "my mother." Those who are priests you are to call "my lord" and "my patron;" the consecrated celibates in the church,<sup>31</sup> "my lord" and "my lady." Honor those who are to be honored, love those who are to be loved, and respect those who are to be respected, doing all of this reverently and diligently. In this way you will rise above the [lower] law, and join those who are lords of the law. But when you call someone "my father" or "my brother," treat them as though they were indeed your father or brother; let not your words deceive! For it is not right that you should do them harm, even though they harm you. Even though they err [toward you], you must not yourself err toward the one who is your brother in love. Remember to make yourself a servant to those whom you call "my lord" and "my lady." Even though they should harm you, do not rise up against them, but be patient with them as [you would be patient] with the Lord. And remember that those you call "my son" and "my daughter" are indeed your children in love; nurture, encourage, and love them as much as you are able. And if they should wander away from you, do not fall away from them or turn your back on them. And remember that those whom you call "my lord" and "my patron" offer up sacrifice and prayers on your behalf, and that of all persons; therefore be at peace with them.

The *Liber Graduum* reflects an understanding of the monastic way in which one does not isolate oneself from others, but rather cultivates relationships of love, nurture, and reconciliation with all types of people, monastic and non-monastic alike.

A revision of the exclusively individualistic,  
ascetical understanding of Syrian monasticism

From the preceding considerations one can conclude that the monastic way as the *Liber Graduum* envisions it differs considerably from that which Ephrem and Theodoret described. This fact in itself, however, need have no effect on one's confidence in the adequacy of the individualistic, ascetical model as a guide to the character of Syrian monasticism. One could claim that the *Liber Graduum* was the exception which proved Ephrem and Theodoret's descriptions to be the rule.

Yet I would suggest that considerations arising from the writings of Ephrem and Theodoret themselves demonstrate that one cannot speak of the Syrian monastics' understanding of their vocation exclusively in terms of self-mortification and solitude.

The first of these considerations has to do with the fact that neither Ephrem nor Theodoret were practicing monastics. The second relates to the presence in their writings of an awareness of the importance of the communal and relational virtues. By combining these considerations with the *Liber Graduum's* very different model of the monastic life, I hope to demonstrate that



Syrian monasticism in the fourth and fifth centuries was far more diverse than the individualistic, ascetical understanding of it has indicated.

Palladius's *Lausiac History*, which contains the earliest account of Ephrem's life, speaks of him as a recluse who left his cell to spend a year assisting the people of Edessa when they had fallen victim to a terrible famine.<sup>32</sup> As Edmund Beck has pointed out, the element of this account concerning the famine and Ephrem's role in it comports quite well with what we know of him from his own writings. Yet the description of Ephrem as a recluse does not fit, due to the active participation in the controversy with the local Arians to which his writings provide evidence, as well as the leadership in the worship life of the Edessan and Nisibine churches which his enormous quantities of hymns and sermons demonstrate.<sup>33</sup> Added to this consideration is Ephrem's absence from Theodoret's list of Syrian monastics, in spite of the fact that his life fell within the time span which Theodoret covered. Unlike Palladius, Theodoret was himself a Syrian, and would have been far more familiar with this most famous representative of Syriac-speaking Christianity. Had Theodoret known that Ephrem had been an anchorite for even part of his life,

it is difficult to imagine that he would have excluded him from his list of those solitaries who left their cells to take active part in the life of the church. These considerations lead to the conclusion that, contrary to Palladius, Ephrem was not a monastic.

Theodoret, on the other hand, did live for approximately 10 of his younger years in a monastery.<sup>34</sup> Yet he spent the last 40 years of his life (including the period when he wrote the *Historia Religiosa*) as a busy ecclesiastic, actively engaged in the affairs of his diocese and taking significant part in the christological controversy. This fact would not in itself disqualify him as a spokesperson for Syrian monasticism, yet it does when added to the fact that he did not consider himself one. He wrote the *Historia Religiosa* from an outsider's perspective, speaking of himself not as one who had taken part in the "athletic contest" of monastic life, but simply as one who knew, either personally or by reputation, those who had. Although he was on familiar terms with many of the subjects of his short biographies, he never wrote as though he had shared in their lifestyle, but as one of those who sought to learn by their example.<sup>35</sup>

The significance of these considerations concerning Ephrem and Theodoret lies in the fact that it limits the value of their accounts as windows onto the Syrian monastics' own understanding of the nature and purpose of their calling. Self-mortification and solitude were the principal monastic virtues for Ephrem and Theodoret, but were they for the monastics themselves? At stake in the answer to this question is the validity of the individualistic and ascetical model as a generalization about the monastics of Syriac-speaking Christianity.

Assistance in answering this question can come from an analogous situation in Egyptian monasticism: the relationship between Palladius's *Lausiac History* and the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. Like Theodoret, Palladius had been a monastic for a short time before engaging in his career as bishop of Helenopolis in Asia Minor.<sup>36</sup> And he also wrote his short biographies of the Egyptian and Palestinian monastics from an outsider's perspective, addressing them to a layperson. The significance of Palladius's work for this study lies in the marked difference between its account of certain of the monks of Scete and Nitria in Egypt, and the stories about those same individuals one finds in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. While Palladius contains mostly stories of the Egyptian

monastics' feats of self-denial and physical discipline, the *Apophthegmata*, which arose from within these monastics' communities themselves, relate instead their sayings on love of God and one's neighbor. The two texts' quite different references to Moses the Ethiopian provide an illuminating example of their varying perspectives. Palladius's account revolves around Moses's notorious early life as a robber and his acts of self-mortification after his conversion.<sup>37</sup> The *Apophthegmata*, on the other hand, while it does mention his past, spends far more time relating Moses's teachings on the different virtues involved in the monastic life. As the following well-known story illustrates, the most important of these virtues were not self-denial and physical discipline, but love and humility:

In Scete a brother was once found guilty. They assembled the elders and sent a message to abba Moses telling him to come. But he would not come. Then the presbyter sent, saying: "Come, for a meeting of the monks is waiting for you." Moses rose up and went. He took with him an old basket which he filled with sand and carried on his back. The people who went to meet him said: "What is this, father?" The old man said to them: "My sins are chasing me, and I do not see them - Have I come today to judge the sins of someone else?" They listened to him, and said nothing to the erring brother, but pardoned him.<sup>38</sup>

Palladius placed more emphasis on the Egyptian monastics' spectacular feats of self-denial than on the teachings concerning the relational virtues which the *Apophthegmata Patrum* demonstrates to have been of greater importance to the monastics themselves. Yet if we had only Palladius's account, would not our impression of the character of monasticism in Scete and Nitria be far different? Would we not consider the fasting and deprivation of sleep of which we read in the *Lausiac History* to be the principal concern to Moses in his monastic pilgrimage? Without the *Apophthegmata* as a corrective, would we not be more inclined to accept Palladius's insistence on the importance of self-mortification to the spirituality of the Egyptian monastics?

The *Apophthegmata* allows us to recognize that Palladius's non-monastic perspective is of limited utility in discovering the Egyptian monastics' own understanding of the primary means of attaining perfection in the monastic life. The fact that Ephrem and Theodoret's accounts of Syrian monasticism also come from outsiders' points of view suggests a similar conclusion regarding their usefulness in presenting the Syrian monastics' self-understanding. Certainly, one

cannot check their descriptions of specific individuals against another source, as one can with Palladius and the *Apophthegmata*. Yet one can compare their claim that discipline of the body and isolation from other human beings made up the primary monastic virtues with the *Liber Graduum's* insistence on the primacy of forgiveness, reconciliation, and love of others. If Ephrem and Theodoret, as outsiders writing for non-monastics, laid as disproportionate an amount of stress on the more colorful elements of their subjects' monastic lives as did Palladius, then the relational, communal understanding of the monastic way which the *Liber Graduum* envisions gives reason to assert that one cannot characterize Syrian monasticism exclusively in terms of asceticism and individualism.

Another reason to question the value of the individualistic, ascetical understanding of Syrian monasticism comes from within the writings of Ephrem and Theodoret themselves. Alongside of self-mortification and solitude, their accounts of the monastic life in the Syriac-speaking areas also refer to the importance of the relational and communal virtues. Contrary to the impression one gains from most secondary studies of Syrian monasticism, Ephrem and Theodoret did know of the

currency among their subjects of those ideas concerning monastic life which the author of the *Liber Graduum* considered its central components.

In spite of the emphasis he placed on the complete isolation of the Edessan anchorites, Ephrem was aware that some of them did live in groups, and that, rather than constitute a hindrance to their pursuit of heaven, this arrangement provided an example of how Christians ought to live together:

Sometimes two live together;  
here great love reigns.  
Corporeally, they are two,  
yet one in will.  
Sometimes there are three;  
here dwells harmony,  
because there is no disunity or treachery,  
only love and peace.  
At times there are four,  
and the Holy Spirit dwells with them,  
because they are a single body,  
a single pure temple for God.<sup>39</sup>

Ephrem recognized the positive value of small groups of anchorites living together, displaying that love of one another which, according to the *Liber Graduum*, was the primary virtue of the monastic life.

The subjects of Theodoret's biographical sketches also displayed an appreciation for the value of monastics living together. He told the story of how Ammianus,

finding Eusebius of Teleda walled in his tiny cell, persuaded him to come out and accept responsibility as head of a monastic community:

"Tell me my friend," [Ammianus] said to him, "whom do you think you please by having adopted this austere and laborious life?" He, of course, as was natural, replied: "God, the teacher and lawgiver of virtue." "So since you love him," continued Ammianus, "I shall show you a way by which you will both kindle your love the more and serve the Beloved. Restricting all one's care to oneself would not escape, I think, the charge of self-love, for the divine law prescribes loving one's neighbor as oneself. Admitting many to a share of one's wealth is characteristic of the virtue of charity...So since you too are a lover of the God who has created and saved, make many others as well his lovers; for this is specially welcome to the common Master." With these and like words he charmed the divine man; digging through his voluntary prison, he led him out and away, and entrusted to him care of the brethren.<sup>40</sup>

Although most of the monastics of the *Historia Religiosa* considered life spent alone with oneself and God the highest form of monastic service, Ammianus realized that one best loved God when one loved others on God's behalf.

Similarly, Theodoret's account demonstrates an awareness that love of others also takes precedence at times over discipline of the body. Avitus, a renowned solitary in Northern Syria, came to visit Marcianus. After spending all afternoon in discussion and prayer, Marcianus explained to his guest that he was hungry and



asked him to join in a meal. When Avitus refused, on the ground that he would be breaking his fast, Marcianus replied

We too, my friend, lead the same life as you and embrace the same profession, honor labors before repose and prefer fasting to nourishment, and take it only after nightfall. But we know that charity is a thing more to be prized than fasting, since the one is a work laid down by divine law, while the other depends on our own authority.

Although austere and often extreme forms of self-mortification abound in the *Historia Religiosa*, Theodoret's subjects also recognized at times that God desires mercy more even than the sacrifice of one's own physical comfort.

### Conclusions

This chapter has suggested two reasons why the sources upon which scholars have based their generalizations concerning the individualistic and ascetical character of Syrian monasticism cannot support those generalizations. First, because the individualistic and ascetical model claimed to describe the Syrian monastics' own understanding of their particular form of Christian life when the sources for

this model were not themselves monastics. Adding weight to this contention is the analogy of Palladius's *Lausiac History*, whose emphasis on self-mortification the *Apophthegmata Patrum* proves to be an inaccurate portrayal of the spirituality of the Egyptian monastics. And second, these sources themselves at times indicate the importance, albeit not the primacy, of communal, relational understandings of the monastic way. When one remembers as well that the relational virtues were primary for the *Liber Graduum*, a Syriac text whose author and audience were monastics, then one must revise one's understanding of the character of Syrian monasticism. Rather than accept an easy generalization of this branch of the early monastic movement as concerned principally with denial of the desires of the body and flight from human company, one must recognize the variety of Syrian monasticism, in which relational and communal virtues held as much importance for some as individualistic and ascetical ones held for others.

ENDNOTES FOR CHAPTER 3:

1. Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," in *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, 1982), 109.
2. I am here using the term "ascetic" in its common connotation as referring to practices of physical self-denial and self-mortification, such as fasting and celibacy. Its use among the theologians of the early church was often far broader: for example, Basil of Caesarea used it to refer to a variety of disciplines, both physical and spiritual, the purpose of which was spiritual formation; see his "Ascetical Discourse" in M. Monica Wagner, C.S.C., ed., *Saint Basil: Ascetical Works*, in *FC*, vol. 9 (1950), 207-216.
3. Arthur Vööbus, "Liber Graduum: Some Aspects of its Significance for the History of Early Syrian Asceticism," *Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile* 7 (1954), 108-128.
4. Jean Gribomont, "Monasticism and Asceticism: Eastern Christianity," in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. by Bernard McGinn (New York, 1985), 89-112.
5. Arthur Vööbus, *Celibacy, a Requirement for Admission to Baptism in the Early Syrian Church* (Stockholm, 1951).
6. *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, CSCO 184 & 197 (1960), 2:61-69.
7. See Vööbus's discussion of the Edessan anchorites in *Literary-Critical and Historical Studies in Ephrem the Syrian* (Stockholm, 1958), 94-111, as well as *HASO* 2:92-100.
8. Brown, 103-152. See also his "Town, Village, and Holy Man: The Case of Syria" in *Assimilation et resistance a la culture greco-romaine dans le monde ancien*, ed. by D. M. Pippidi (Bucharest, 1976), pp. 213-220.
9. "Early Syrian Asceticism." *Numen* 20 (1973), 1-19.

10. *Antioch païenne et chrétienne: Libanius, Chrysostome, et les moines de Syrie* (Paris, 1959), 291-310.

11. Edmund Beck, ed., *Des Heiligen Ephraems des Syrers Hymnen auf Abraham Kidunaya und Julianos Saba*, CSCO vols. 322-323 (1972).

12. This sermon is contained in Edmund Beck, ed., *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermones IV*, CSCO vol. 334 (1973), 16-28. The three terms in the title do not refer to different types of monastics, but rather are different designations for anchorites.

13. Ibid, vv. 1-3.

14. " , vv 189-192.

15. " , vv. 237-245.

16. " , vv. 421-424.

17. " , vv. 157-161.

18. " , vv. 443-444.

19. For a discussion of the date of the *Historia Religiosa* see Price's introduction to Theodoret of Cyrrihus, *A History of the Monks of Syria*, ed. and tran. by R. M. Price (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1985), xiv-xv.

20. Ibid, Prol:7, in Price, 7.

21. Pierre Canivet, *Le monachisme Syrien selon Théodoret de Cyr.* (Paris, 1977), 255-290.

22. Theodoret, III:3, , in Price, 38.

23. Ibid, X:2 , in Price, 89-90.

24. " , XXVII:3, in Price, 178.

25. " , XXVI:10, in Price, 164.

26. " , XIII:2, in Price, 100-101.

27. " , XV:1, in Price, 114.

28. " , XIX:3, in Price, 129-130.
29. " , III:4, in Price, 38-39.
30. *LG Ser.* 29, par. 1.
31. The Syriac here is *qadishē* and *qadishatha*. Translated literally this would be "the holy men and women." In my translation I am following Edmund Beck's suggestion that these were technical terms for those in the Syriac-speaking church who, after a period of marriage, had taken a vow of celibacy. These differed from monastics in that did not separate themselves from ordinary life in society. This reading receives support in that the terms *qadishe* and *qadishatha* follow directly after the mention of priests. See Beck's "Monachisme et Ascetisme chez S. Ephrem," *L'Orient Syrien* 3 (1958), 277.
32. Palladius, *The Lausiaca History*, par. 40, tran. by Robert Meyer, in *ACW*, vol. 34 (1964), 116-117.
33. Beck, 273-274.
34. Price, xxii-xxiii.
35. In the Prologue to the *Historia Religiosa*, Theodoret assumes the role of an observer standing outside the action of his narrative.
36. Meyer, 5-6.
37. Palladius, ch. 19, in Meyer, 67-70.
38. Owen Chadwick, *Western Asceticism* (Philadelphia, 1958), 102-103.
39. Ephrem, "To the Solitaries," vv. 173-184.
40. Theodoret, V:4, in Price, 59-60.
41. *Ibid*, III:12, in Price, 42-43.

CHAPTER 4:  
The Two Ways of *Kinutha* and *Gamirutha*

If the title of the *Liber Graduum*<sup>1</sup> leads one to expect to find there an elaborate system of degrees or stages of the Christian life by which one ascends the ladder of perfection, the text itself will prove a disappointment. Rather than speaking of an increasingly difficult series of tasks one must undertake in one's progress toward heaven, the author described two broadly defined and often overlapping ways or paths along the Christian pilgrimage: the lesser, non-monastic way of *kinutha* (righteousness, justice) and the higher, monastic way of *gamirutha* (perfection). The distinction between *kinutha* and *gamirutha* lies at the heart of the theology of the *Liber Graduum* in that the author consistently employed this distinction to express his contention that forgiveness, reconciliation, and active demonstrations of love comprised the essential monastic virtues, and rendered monastic life the highest form of Christian service.

The author used this distinction to emphasize the relational virtues in two ways. First, wherever the text directly compares the lifestyle of *kinutha* with that of

*gamirutha*, it characterizes the latter in terms of refusal to judge, forgiveness of those who have fallen into sin, and ministry to those outside the Christian fold. The fourteenth sermon consists of a long series of quotes such as the following from paragraph 1:

"The *kinē* [those who follow the way of *kinutha*] do away with anger and restrain themselves from it; the *gamirē* [those who follow the way of *gamirutha*] not only hold themselves back from anger, but love those who would murder them, and pray for all human beings as well.

Wherever the text compares the two ways, it speaks of *kinutha* in terms of maintaining one's own moral and spiritual uprightness, while it claims that *gamirutha* moves beyond this by actively ministering to others, most especially one's enemies.

Second, in some of the instances in which the author spoke of *kinutha* without comparing it to *gamirutha*, he included among the characteristics of the former virtues elsewhere reserved for the latter. The seventh sermon deals exclusively with the commandments God has given to the *kinē*. The second paragraph begins by saying that "every one of the children of Adam is our neighbor, and the child of our flesh." It continues this idea by interpreting the parable of the Good Samaritan to mean that the spiritual and physical needs of all human beings

render them our neighbors, and oblige us to seek to meet those needs. In this instance and others, ministry to others is not simply the responsibility of those following the way of *gamirutha*; it pertains to those who live under the lesser commandments of *kinutha* as well.

As even this ambiguity concerning *kinutha* shows, the author maintained a consistent attitude toward the relational virtues. Love, forgiveness, and reconciliation stand at the center of the commandments God has given to those seeking *gamirutha* (and, at times, those God has given to the followers of *kinutha* as well). Monasticism constituted a higher form of Christian pilgrimage because it allowed those engaged in it to organize their lives so as best to exemplify these relational virtues.

The fall of Adam and Eve and the  
beginning of the two ways

In the beginning God intended that the way of *gamirutha* comprise the essential pattern of human relations. Largely because God provided for their sustenance, removing from them any anxiety over their own physical well-being, Adam and Eve were able to fulfill



this intention by focusing their attention on the "heavenly things" of fellowship with their creator. Those virtues which the New Testament names the "fruits of the Spirit" characterized Adam and Eve's lives during this period:

The fruits of the Spirit are these, that one should put on the mercy, compassion, harmony, peace, and glory of our Lord; that is, that one should fulfill  
 5           these fruits in love, in patience of spirit, in pleasantness, forbearance, moderation, and holiness, without lust. These are the fruits of the spirit which they observed in Eden.<sup>2</sup>

Life in Eden consisted of those relational virtues, so perfectly embodied in Christ, which make up the way of *gamirutha*.

But the text spends little time discussing Adam and Eve's condition prior to their transgression of God's commandment, concerning itself far more instead with the Fall and its results. "The house of Adam," says Sermon 15, paragraph 8, "departed therefore from [the things of] heaven and loved [the things of] earth, ... having transgressed the law of its creator." Adam and Eve fell when they focussed their affection on the "things of earth" rather than on their creator. The text describes these "earthly things" in a variety of ways; in one instance the phrase refers to an inordinate attachment to food and sex,<sup>3</sup> while in another it means a desire to be

able to distinguish between good and evil, and thus pass judgment on other human beings<sup>4</sup>. In either case, since Adam and Eve's sin consisted in substituting the things of earth for those of God as the objects of their loyalty and affection, God punished them by giving them what they wanted; their fascination with earthly things resulted in their bondage to them. By no longer providing for their physical needs, God saw to it that the exigencies of finding their own sustenance in a hostile environment would from that point on determine the entire fabric of Adam and Eve's lives, as well as those of their descendants. Describing the result of their choice, God told Adam and Eve that "it has released you from the heavenly things, and from the sweetness of your creator, and has bound you to transgression, labor, anxiety, and pride."<sup>5</sup>

Sermon 21 divides God's relation to humanity into "the prior things" of life before the Fall and the "later things" of life in its shadow. In the time of the "prior things," human beings communed with God directly and God met all their needs. The loss of God's sustaining presence meant a life of labor and pain as Adam and Eve made their way in the world of the "later things." The difficulty of meeting one's own physical needs led to

anxiety over them, which in turn erected barriers between individuals and produced enmity and hatred of others. The cares of daily life left little room for the love, acceptance, and compassion for others which, according to God's original design, were to characterize human relations. As a result of the Fall, humanity abandoned the way of *gamirutha*.

#### The two ways and the Old Testament saints

At this point God might simply have given up on humanity and started over; but God chose to do otherwise: "God did not put them aside like something permanently broken, but rather was merciful to Adam and Eve, and gave them another law, by which they would live if they observed it."<sup>6</sup> This other law was the way of *kinutha*, a new set of rules for human relations. Although a considerably lesser ethic than the way of *gamirutha*, the commandments of *kinutha* were not easy, given the new situation in which humanity found itself. Whereas the "fruits of the Spirit" had come naturally to Adam and Eve prior to their transgression, human beings would now have to work hard simply to maintain *kinutha*'s central requirement that one refrain from treating others contrary to how one would wish that they treat oneself.<sup>7</sup>

In this way the commandments of *kinutha* became the primary framework around which the descendants of Adam and Eve could organize their lives in relation to one another. Would these commandments serve as a means of relating to God as well? Addressing this question, the author said

It remains [for us to explain] the inheritance of the *kinē*. If they are righteous in earthly things, and their good deeds are many, and if they do no evil to other human beings, they are, on account of this, justified. [Even] if they transgress and do evil in one way or another, yet their good deeds are more numerous than their evil deeds, mercy comes upon them, and they are delivered and saved.<sup>8</sup>

The answer is yes; as well as providing a way of ordering one's life in a world bound to the things of earth, *kinutha* could also direct one's journey along the path to eternity.

The way of *kinutha* was thus an admirable response to the new conditions of human life following the Fall. While realistically assessing human capacities in a fallen world, it provided quite adequate means of relating to God and other human beings. It would seem that *kinutha* had simply replaced *gamirutha* as God's standard for human behavior, allowing the latter to pass out of human experience.

Yet the author considered the way of *gamirutha* too central to God's relation to humanity to admit that it had been forever lost with the Fall. While the virtues of *kinutha* characterize the lives of most of the Old Testament saints (to whom the text refers as "prophets"<sup>9</sup>), some of them increased sufficiently in their love of God and others as to come close to embodying the lifestyle of *gamirutha*: "Thus all of the prophets hoped and waited for that which God had prepared and would reveal [in Christ], but some of them approached the love [which belongs to] *gamirutha*."<sup>10</sup>

The author adduced the example of Moses to illustrate his belief in the continuing presence of the higher way in the Old Testament. Through his willingness to sacrifice himself on behalf of the people of Israel, Moses demonstrated that form of love which best characterizes *gamirutha*:

When God sought to destroy the children of Israel, Moses pleaded on behalf of those who consistently incurred God's wrath and offended God, saying "If you would blot them out, blot me out as well from your book of life." Why did Moses place himself along with sinners? Because that which he wished the righteous ones would do for him should he fall into sin, so he did for the Israelites. See how in this way the *kinē* draw near the way of *gamirutha*!<sup>11</sup>

By applauding Moses for his intercession on behalf of the Israelites, the author voiced a conviction which was central to the spirituality of the early Greek-speaking monastics as well: the idea that, upon drawing nearer to God, human beings grow unable to hold on to their customary self-deceptions and become increasingly aware of their own sinfulness. This in turns encourages love for sinful others, whose condition they now know themselves to share.<sup>12</sup>

Abraham provides another example of those in the Old Testament whose love and concern for others exceeded the commandments of *kinutha* and reached toward *gamirutha*:

Likewise Abraham drew near to *gamirutha* when he caused his love to shine on all those who met him, good and evil alike. He nourished the hungry, and clothed all those who were in need and stricken. He would not allow his servants to minister to them, but rather stood before them as a servant himself. In this way he imitated our Lord.<sup>13</sup>

Joseph, when he returned good for his brothers' evil intention of killing him; David, when he had Saul in his power yet did not harm him; Elisha, when he gave food and drink to his enemies; these and other examples point to the fact that the Old Testament faithful could still attain to the love, forgiveness, and reconciliation which constituted the way of *gamirutha*.

Yet the author insisted that, while these individuals had come close to reaching *gamirutha*, they did not realize it completely. "Thus God held the prophets back in those days from the commandments of love which belong to *gamirutha*" says paragraph 2 of sermon 9. Why does responsibility for the Old Testament saints' inability to achieve the perfect love so central to the divine plan lie with God? The answer to this perplexing question involves the author's conceptions of providence and the exact nature of *gamirutha* itself.

The following statement appears in the same paragraph which praises Moses's identification with the sinful people: "But in another place God caused Moses to fall below even the way of *kinutha* when God said to him 'Command the Levites to destroy their brothers and fathers, because they have worshiped the calf, and exchanged the calf for death.'" <sup>14</sup> Paragraph 8 of the same sermon makes a similar point about Abraham:

In another place God caused to descend from the love which belongs to *gamirutha* one who loved good and evil persons alike; God dismissed him [Abraham] even from the [ordinary way] of the prophets, so that he destroyed the evil kings who had entered into that [land] which did not belong to them.

The author pointed out that, in order to leave no question whether God did indeed command Abraham to do these things, the biblical text presents us with the fact that Abraham received the blessing of Melchizedek, God's representative, immediately after engaging in this act of violence. David, Elisha, and the other Old Testament notables whom the text singles out for praise were similarly unable to reach *gamirutha* because God commanded them to do that which was contrary even to the law of *kinutha*, commit acts of violence.<sup>15</sup>

Of the many issues which these passages raise, that of theodicy demands the most immediate attention. Why would God command the Old Testament saints to violate the law of *gamirutha*, when this law was God's idea in the first place? The answer lies in the author's conception of providence. Drawing on God's use of the Assyrians to chastise the erring Israelites, the author explained that in the Old Testament God employed human beings as agents of reproof and judgment.<sup>16</sup> The righteous heroes mentioned above functioned in a similar role as instruments of God's will. Yet why did God choose to relate to the world in this fashion, when it so clearly contradicted the love and forgiveness which the Incarnation revealed to be central to God's dealings with



humanity, and which the author conceived to be the primary characteristic of Jesus' dealings with other human beings? Attempting to answer this question, sermon 9, paragraph 5 simply says "this is because in those days there was enmity between God and humanity." The enmity to which this passages alludes seems to refer to the hardness of human hearts; yet why this condition existed in the past but not today, and why it required what the author considered such an extreme response on God's part, remains unanswered.

For whatever reason God might have commanded such behavior in the past, no one can claim divine guidance in committing acts of violence today. Paragraph 6 of sermon 9 says

But for those who wish to turn their backs on evil, remember that our Lord no longer makes war<sup>17</sup> [against humans] as in the past. To those who, on account of their own desires, make war with others, and those who lift up their hands against their companions, our Lord says "the one who raises his hand against his companion will not be free of guilt."

Throughout the passages detailing God's use of the Old Testament saints as agents of divine justice, and these individuals' consequent inability to attain to *gamirutha*, the text stresses again and again that one cannot escape responsibility for one's violent actions

against others today by claiming to act on God's behalf; God simply no longer relates to the world in this fashion.

Another question arises out of this discussion of the Old Testament saints and the two ways: why did the author go to such lengths to explain that these individuals drew near *gamirutha*, yet did not reach it? Would it not have been simpler to say that they indeed did exemplify the higher way, because their acts of love were their own, while their acts of violence arose, not from their own hearts, but from the direct instigation of God?

The author could not ascribe *gamirutha* to these individuals due to his insistence on the complete incompatibility of violence and the higher way. Central to the "greater commandments" of *gamirutha* is the Sermon on the Mount's insistence on non-violence. Commenting on the higher way as the Sermon on the Mount explicates it, sermon 16, paragraph 1 says "Our Lord said to you, 'to the one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other cheek as well.' But if you give your whole body to such a person, you will grow [in the way of *gamirutha*] more than one who only gives the other cheek." Rather than

simply refusing to respond in kind when one used force against them, the followers of the way of perfection were to offer their very lives in order to convert the enemy. The stridency of the author's insistence on non-violence explains his strange approach to the Old Testament "prophets." Rather than consider that one who committed violence against other human beings could still have risen to *gamirutha*, the author explained that God treated the Old Testament faithful when they died as though they had achieved the life of perfection, although in truth their violent activities had disqualified them for it.<sup>18</sup>

As these passages concerning the way of *gamirutha* in the Old Testament indicate, while God deals with humanity in a variety of ways, the commandments of *gamirutha* remain the same. The insistence that even activities which take place according to God's will might prevent one from reaching *gamirutha* also appears in the *Liber Graduum's* teaching on the inappropriateness of occupying positions of authority in the church if one seeks to follow the higher way.<sup>19</sup> In paragraph 31 of sermon 19, the author claimed that, while the exercise of ecclesiastical authority holds a legitimate place within the divine economy, it necessarily involves passing judgment on others. Since non-judgmentalness constitutes

a central characteristic of *gamirutha*, those seeking to follow the higher commandments must eschew their positions of leadership in the church, even though they exercise their authority on God's behalf. In the same way, non-violence belongs so thoroughly to the way of perfection that even when Moses, Abraham, and the others engaged in a legitimate use of force against God's enemies, they did so at the expense of attaining to the state of *gamirutha*, for which their ministry to and love for others had qualified them.

#### The two ways in the New Testament

In the beginning of the twenty third sermon, after explaining again why the "prophets" had not been able to realize their search for perfection, the author added that the way of *gamirutha*, which God had intended to be the normal pattern of human relations, had throughout the Old Testament found its only true expression in the lives of Adam and Eve prior to the Fall. If the way of *gamirutha* were to reenter history, human beings needed a second Adam who could exemplify that true humanity which they had lost in the fall; this God provided in Christ:

Our Lord revealed this [way of *gamirutha*] in order that all human beings might know the state in which God created Adam. For in his very person our Lord manifested the creation of Adam, and demonstrated how he lived like one of the angels in heaven, without desire, lust, anxiety, or guilt. He was born in the form of Adam, in order that he might show human beings their original natures, and how they were created. For the apostle said "Everything has been made new in Jesus."<sup>20</sup>

The purpose of the Incarnation was to re-introduce that authentic form of human life which the author named the way of *gamirutha*.

As the above quotation indicates, Christ functioned primarily as an exemplar; he came to embody the relational virtues in such a way as to teach human beings how to order their lives according to the original pattern of Eden. Sermon 20, paragraph 8 explains that the way of perfection lies in imitating Christ, particularly his prayer and suffering on behalf of others:

Thus one ascends to the most difficult stage by means of the prayer and example our Lord gave us when he cried out loudly in prayer and shed tears and suffered until he sweat blood. ... For in our own form our Lord bore our burden, [placing himself] under subjection to sin and death. And through great suffering he demonstrated to us how we might ascend to that stage [of *gamirutha*]. For there is no other way to ascend to this stage except by the way which our Lord demonstrated to us: prayer, fasting, humility, and suffering on behalf of others.

Similarly, sermon 17, paragraphs 4-5 explain that the path to *gamirutha* lies in actively demonstrating love for one's enemies after the example of Jesus:

This was another of the sufferings of our Lord: he healed the ear of the one who had come to take him captive and murder him. If you are oppressed in this way, yet do that which is right toward the one who seeks to kill you, you will be made perfect. Our Lord also suffered when he prayed "Father, forgive these who afflict my head and strike me with rods and who strike me on the face, scorning me, who give me vinegar to drink, and deride me with bitter curses, hanging me on a cross in anger, piercing my feet and hands in hatred, and stabbing me with a spear in enmity." If you, when faced with similar adversity, can pray "My Lord Jesus, forgive those who do this evil to me, as they did evil to you, O Lord of eternity!", you will be greatly glorified.

The way of perfection thus becomes an *imitatio Christi*; it lies in observing the example of Jesus' forgiveness of and suffering on behalf of his persecutors, and seeking to follow it.

While functioning as an example of reconciliation and self-sacrifice seems to be the primary purpose of the Incarnation in the *Liber Graduum*, the author gives hints that Christ's life and death held further meaning than this. Beyond this exemplary role of the Incarnation lies a participatory one as well. When we forgive our enemies, seek to overcome their enmity, and suffer on their behalf, we partake of the sufferings of our Lord, and share in his redemption as well. After listing at

length the ways in which one might imitate Christ's love and forgiveness of all persons, especially his enemies, the author said "If you will suffer in this way your soul will be blessed, your heart cleansed, and you will see the Lord."<sup>21</sup> Similarly, paragraph 2 of sermon 17 says

Our Lord suffered by giving his cheek to the one who struck him, making peace with him and praying for him. If, when you face persecution, you pray for the one who beats you and seek to be reconciled to him you will have suffered with our Lord, and will be glorified with him as well.

The way of *gamirutha* necessitates accepting, forgiving, and suffering on behalf of others, particularly one's enemies. Christ came to teach us this way, and make us participants in his glory and redemption when we followed it.

This idea of redemption through suffering on Christ's behalf raises questions as to the author's attitude toward the sacraments. If imitating and sharing in Christ's sufferings communicate grace to the followers of *gamirutha*, would not these activities take the place of baptism and the Eucharist, those rites of the church usually associated with participating in Christ's redemption? Those who claim that the text contains a Messalian devaluation of the sacraments would receive support if such were the case. Yet the author made it clear in sermon 12, paragraph 2 that one cannot separate

the relational virtues which make up the way of *gamirutha* from participation in the visible church, its baptism, and its altar:

When we possess great humility, and hold in reverence all human beings, great and small, that church which is in heaven and that altar which is in the Spirit will be revealed to us. We will offer sacrifice upon that altar with the prayer of our hearts and the desire of our bodies when we believe in this visible altar, and when we consider this priesthood which ministers on it a true one.

Following Christ by loving others and suffering on their behalf did form avenues of grace for the author of the *Liber Graduum*, yet not apart from or to the exclusion of the sacraments' ability to form such avenues. The author found in the life of Jesus, as well as the lives of his apostles, an unwavering embodiment of those relational virtues which comprise *gamirutha*. Yet in their words he often found injunctions to behavior which falls far short of the lifestyle of perfection, and which contradict other instances in which they gave instruction on how to incorporate the relational virtues.

But there are other commandments ... in which our Lord said "Walk with no Gentile along the way, and do not enter the cities of the Samaritans, but go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (That is, preach only to to your own kind). Further, he said "And when you come to a city, ask who is worthy in it, and remain there. Ask peace of



no one you meet along the way. If they will not receive you, when you leave, wipe the dust from your feet; for it will be easier for Sodom on the day of judgment than it will be for that place."<sup>22</sup>

Although many of these sayings strike us as fairly innocuous, to the author of the *Liber Graduum* they contradicted the spirit of open acceptance of others which Jesus' life exemplified, and which one found on his lips in other scriptural texts: "But these [sayings] of our Lord contradict his great commandments: 'Consider all persons to be better than yourselves,' and 'When you enter the city of the Gentiles, eat that which they set before you.'"<sup>23</sup> In this and several other passages, the author found that some of Jesus and the apostles' commandments thoroughly prescribe following the way of *gamirutha*, while others enjoin behavior which seems to violate it.

To explain how these seemingly contradictory sets of ethical injunctions could come from the same sources the author employed the distinction between *gamirutha* and *kinutha* as the text's central hermeneutical principle. The commandments which call for acceptance and love for others belong to the way of *gamirutha*, and were given to those strong enough to follow them. Those injunctions

which call for dissociating oneself from sinners were given to those of weaker conscience, and comprise the way of *kinutha*.

Thus God established the greater and lesser commandments. For they were not given as if to one person, but to everyone, each according to his own ability. For just as God commanded "Have nothing to do with adulterers," so [God commanded] "Be all things to all people." This [last] was given that one might not judge, and that one might love all people according to one's ability. God also said "Let those who are strong bear the consciences of those who are weak, and always care for them, and instruct them with humility." These lesser commandments were given to the children and the immature, whose consciences might be offended [by keeping the greater commandments].<sup>24</sup>

According to the author, Jesus and the apostles lived the life of *gamirutha*, and often taught its precepts to others. Yet *gamirutha*'s prescription to associate with and minister to sinners, pagans, and heretics could prove disastrous to the spiritually immature; it might lead them into sins of judgmentalness,<sup>25</sup> or even cause them to emulate the undesirable behavior of those to whom they sought to minister. Realizing this, Jesus and his followers instructed the "weak of conscience" to maintain their own uprightness rather than associate with such outsiders.

The idea of an accommodation to the weakness of the spiritually immature explains the continuing validity of the way of *kinutha* in the New Testament. One would expect that, when Christ came to manifest the lifestyle of *gamirutha*, the lesser way would cease as an option for those who sought to follow him. That *kinutha* did not fall away does not indicate some fundamental dualism in God's treatment of humanity (as Hermann Dörries and Arthur Vööbus would contend),<sup>26</sup> but rather God's sensitivity to the different levels of maturity among Christians. Sermon 30, paragraph 25 indicates God's desire that all should follow the way of *gamirutha*, yet God's recognition that not all can do so:

The revealed, great, and perfect will of our Lord is this: that all should keep themselves in virginity, that they should empty themselves and that their hearts should be purified of all hateful and sinful thoughts. [God wishes] that they should imitate our Lord, taking up their cross and serving him, being made perfect in love by loving and being reconciled to all human beings. ... But our Lord made an accommodation to [the weak], and gave them the lesser commandments.

Because moving beyond oneself and loving others unconditionally is a difficult and dangerous business the commandments of *kinutha* continued to serve as legitimate, albeit lesser, guidelines to the Christian life for those incapable of undertaking the higher way.

The characteristics of *kinutha* and *gamirutha*

"The *kinē* curse no one, nor do they call anyone foolish, stupid, or contemptible, nor do they deceive anyone. But the *gamirē* honor and bless all human beings, teaching them that they should not deceive their companions." For the author of the *Liber Graduum*, one of the central differences between *kinutha* and *gamirutha* lay in their inward vs. outward-looking perspectives. While the *kinē* sought to maintain their own moral integrity (by refraining from such undesirable activities as those listed above), the followers of *gamirutha* focussed their attention on teaching and ministering to others. This and other differences between the two ways (as well as the fact that the highest obligation of *kinutha* bears considerable similarity to the way of *gamirutha*) require examination if one is to understand the centrality of the relational virtues to the text's vision of the Christian life.

The beginning point for a discussion of the lifestyle of *kinutha* should be its involvement in marriage and family life. After providing a catalogue of certain of the virtues of the lesser way, the author said "When one carries on his affairs with this kind of

justice and mercy, and owns property and has a wife, this person is walking in the way of *kinutha*."<sup>27</sup> Although warnings of its inherent dangers occupy most of the text's discussion of sex, the author did believe that God had made provision for sexual relations in marriage when, subsequent to Adam and Eve's transgression, God gave humanity the commandments of *kinutha*.<sup>28</sup> Sermon 13, paragraph 6 states that "to have one wife is in keeping with [the commandments of] *kinutha* and the rules of this world." Although the text spends little time discussing the nature and obligations of married life, clearly marriage comprises a part of the lifestyle of the lesser way.

The author dealt at more length with the civic and social obligations of those who followed the lesser commandments. The first paragraph of sermon 13 outlines the virtues of the *kinē*, many of them involving their conduct in society:

[The followers of] *kinutha* are honest in regard to their own affairs, and do not become involved in that which does not pertain to them. Although they will contend for that which is their own, they do not engage in usury, nor do they accept bribes. They hold their possessions in righteousness, and conduct their business affairs as is fitting before God. They do not lie, nor do they borrow that which they do not possess. They ask only that which they themselves give, and they do so without coercion.

... They do not do to others that which is hateful [to them], and just as they would wish others do for them if they were themselves in need, so they meet the needs of all persons.

*Kinutha* is an ethic intended for those living in normal types of human society and providing for their own welfare. While its followers do look out for their own interests, they do so with honesty and a concern for the physical well-being of others.

The above quotation's final point concerning the provision which the followers of *kinutha* make for the needy occupied much of the author's attention, and constitutes the highest obligation of the lesser way. At first glance, feeding the hungry and clothing the naked, because it involves such obvious concern for the needs of others, would seem to belong to the activities of the higher way. Yet the commandments of *gamirutha* concerning poverty prevent its followers from meeting these needs. The pilgrimage along the way of perfection required giving up all one's personal goods because possessions invariably brought with them anxiety and undue concern for the things of earth. "Now have those who are involved in the destructiveness and anxiety of this world indeed been made perfect?" asks sermon 3, paragraph 2. Feeding and clothing those in need required possessing

the means to do so, and this in turn engaged one in the self-defeating cycle of human commerce. Explaining why the followers of *gamirutha* must minister to others by being themselves poor, rather than seeking to meet the physical needs of the poor, the text says

For those who take up their cross and teach the word are not able to take from this one and give to that one, nor buy nor sell. Nor even are they able to bear their own burden, unless they receive charity. For our Lord said: "do not be anxious for your body, for what you will wear, nor for yourselves, for how you will be clothed." How will these individuals be able to take up the cross and obey without being anxious if they bear another burden in these visible things? Therefore those who take up the cross instead of these visible things bear the burden to pray on behalf of all human beings. In humility they will admonish and teach all human beings, both good and bad, and they will reconcile them one to another and make peace in their houses. Whether they wish to listen to them or not, they must humbly teach all human beings, the worthy and the unworthy. For our Lord wants them to teach even their murderers and pray for those who do them harm, as well as those who love them.<sup>29</sup>

Worthy though it is, providing food and clothing for those in need cannot not lie within the activities of *gamirutha*, because to meet these needs one must possess the material means to do so, and this directly contradicts the higher way's injunction against involvement with the "things of earth" through owning property. Did the author conceive of a callousness on God's part to human suffering, if the highest form of

Christian service did not involve alleviating it? No, because God has commanded the followers of *kinutha* (whom the text implies, but never states, will always form the majority of Christians) to use their wealth and possessions to address the physical needs of others.

Explaining why God does not simply alleviate poverty and hunger by divine fiat, Sermon 10, paragraph 6 says

God is able to make all persons rich, healthy, and children of the house of the Father, needing nothing. Yet God has made some of them rich and some poor, some of them strangers, and some sick. For God tests those who have by means of those who have not, whether they have compassion only for the children of their own flesh, and whether the rich concern themselves with the poor and the sick, the naked and those outsiders who are children of the house of the Father. If the rich do these things, and have compassion on the needy, the needy will be provided for by the rich, and the rich will be justified by the needy.

Echoing this idea, a later sermon states that "By the hand of the *kinē* God provides for the needy."<sup>30</sup> While the continued viability of the way of *kinutha* represents an accommodation to human weakness, it carries considerable responsibility as well. While God does not require the *kinē* to follow the way of poverty, God does insist that they employ their physical possessions in the alleviation of the suffering of those whose poverty is not voluntary.



The commandments of *kinutha* provide a way of ordering one's relation to other human beings and one's search for God in a world whose economic and social realities stand in the shadow of the Fall. The way of *gamirutha*, however, seeks to transcend these realities by reclaiming that authentic humanity which appeared first in Adam and Eve, and only again in Christ. The way of *gamirutha* prescribes a variety of attitudes and activities, at the center of each of which lies self-giving love.

Just as *kinutha* involves Christian responsibilities in a situation of marriage and economic life, so *gamirutha* presupposes a monastic lifestyle. To understand why this is so, one should remember two ideas central to the author's theology: First, that *gamirutha* characterized life in Eden prior to the Fall, and that the way of *gamirutha* today requires seeking to reclaim this original way of being human. And second, that the economic and social structures of life in normal types of society are inimical to the way of *gamirutha* because they reflect the enmity and strife which resulted from the Fall. The monastic life functions as the indispensable prerequisite to the way of *gamirutha* because it removes from its practitioners the daily anxieties of making their

way in the world.<sup>31</sup> In their poverty and utter dependence on God's provision for their needs, monastics emulate Adam and Eve's original reliance on the sustaining presence of God.

Monasticism prepares one for the search for *gamirutha* because its practice of poverty frees monastics from concern over how to support themselves, which in turn allows them to love others. One undertakes the other monastic disciplines in order similarly to facilitate love of God and other human beings. Discussing the fact that one must direct one's fasting to the honor of God and the edification of other human beings, Sermon 10, paragraph 3 offers the following illustration:

Now if one greets and asks peace of another in his heart alone, and does not do so openly, his humility is known only to God; no one else will know of his humility, nor learn from it. Or if one greets and asks peace of another with his lips alone, he will appear humble to other human beings, and [his actions will seem] proper, but not to God; for one serves God in one's heart, while one serves others in the things that are visible. For if we wish to observe and teach the great commandments [of *gamirutha*], and be called great ourselves, let us cleanse and purify the external things with the internal, and the internal things with the external. Let our souls and our bodies be equally fitting in fasting, prayer, and humility. Let our bodies fast from food, desires, and from all magnificence of dress and delicacy of living, and let our souls fast from hateful words, strife, jealousy, envy, cursing, anger, enmity, and from all such evil things.

If fasting is to have any value, a heart free of those destructive attitudes and emotions which the monastic tradition has named the passions<sup>32</sup> must accompany it, and it must serve as an indication of one's humility, rather than the virtuosity of one's self-discipline. Later, the text makes a similar point concerning all of the disciplines of the body:

I control my body so that as a servant I might honor all human beings and stand before them asking peace of them, lowering myself to them. I do this also that I might be eager to come as a servant and do that which pleases my enemies, and to humble myself before those who are lesser than me.<sup>33</sup>

Just as the monastics' poverty facilitated their search for *gamirutha* by removing the anxiety of providing for their physical sustenance, so their disciplines of the body also aided them in their search by inculcating the humility so necessary to their service of other human beings.

Yet important as they are, the monastic practices of poverty, celibacy, fasting, and other physical disciplines do not themselves constitute the way of *gamirutha*, but rather only its necessary preconditions.<sup>34</sup> The perfection which only Christ exemplified fully, and for which the monastics seek, is a way of relating to God and other human beings. Making up the way of *gamirutha*

are a number of attitudes and patterns of behavior which I have called the relational virtues, at the heart of all of which stand active demonstrations of love.

Perhaps that which the author most often mentioned as inimical to the way of perfection was the sin of judging others. Explaining that the ministry of *gamirutha* often took place among sinners, the author warned the community of the *Liber Graduum* of the need to put judgmentalness behind them.

Take notice that you run the race among thieves, and that your portion in life lies among adulterers. Therefore, [even as] you admonish, exhort, or instruct your brother, in love do the same for all human beings. In a humble spirit instruct those who sin, so that they might not continue to sin. As for those who stand [in righteousness], encourage them to stand firm and grow stronger, and not to fall. Neither judge nor condemn any person, nor let any evil come to them by your hands. For it is written: "Judge not, in order that you not be judged," and "imitate your father in heaven, who is gentle to the good and the evil alike, and sends down his rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous."<sup>35</sup>

A later passage in the same sermon indicates that judging others lies contrary not only to the way of *gamirutha*, but to the lesser way as well:

If you judge another, you will by no means arrive at *gamirutha*, and you will even fall from *kinutha*. Even if another does you harm, whether you seek to be among the *gamirē* or the *kinē*, forget about passing judgment; God will judge.<sup>36</sup>

The author insisted that the ability to love others depended on a refusal to note their moral uprightness, or lack of it. "It is right that you should say of yourself in humility 'I am a sinner,' even when you are indeed righteous. But it is not right that you should refer to others this way, whether they are sinners or not," says sermon 30, paragraph 13. The author did not deny that moral distinctions exist among individuals; often he divided humanity into "the good" and "the evil." Nor did he forget that one was to be aware of one's spiritual condition, becoming ever more aware of one's own sinfulness even as one progressed in the way of perfection. Yet the author did demand that the follower of *gamirutha* take no notice of these moral distinctions in others, recognizing that fitting individuals into such categories always renders one unable to love them fully.

The incompatibility of judging others with the search for *gamirutha* reveals itself in the different ways in which its followers and the followers of *kinutha* respond to the problem of moral offense among the members of their respective Christian communities. Expounding on the guidelines one finds in Matthew 18 for exercising ecclesiastical discipline, the author told the *kinē*:

If your brother is at fault with you, discuss it between yourselves; if he listens, you have instructed him. But if not, delay [passing judgement]. It is better for him that you should open the matter up before another. If he listens, it is to his advantage, but if not, delay further. It is better that you reveal the charge in the presence of two others, or even three, than if you open the matter up before the whole church and pass judgment on him.<sup>37</sup>

Here the text lays down the rules for the orderly and compassionate exercise of discipline; one must reprove those at fault gently, involving as few people as possible. Only as a last resort should one open the offense of another up to the scrutiny and judgment of the entire congregation.

Yet elsewhere the text indicates that the whole enterprise of disciplining another contradicts the injunction against judging:

In order that you might know that the commandments were spoken to different groups, our Lord said "Do not judge," but also "Bring [the offender] into shame in the presence of the whole congregation." But if you follow the second of these, to which [of the two ways] do you belong? If you judge, you will have fallen from the higher commandment which prohibits judging. But if you do not judge, you will have condemned the commandment which says "Shame him in the presence of the whole congregation."<sup>38</sup>

In addressing those who followed the way of *kinutha*, the author explained the preferability of admonishing an offender in the presence of small groups of witnesses.

Yet in so doing he indicated that revealing that individual's faults, even finally to the whole church, constituted a valid Christian response to his/her error. When speaking of the way of *gamirutha*, however, the author insisted on the priority of the injunction against judging. Even the legitimate exercise of discipline necessarily involves passing judgment on another, and so violates the law of love. Although the text does speak of admonishing a fellow member of the community who has erred, it indicates that this is to be a private matter; making the sins of another open to anyone else involves setting oneself in judgment on that person.

Another way in which the followers of *gamirutha* obey Jesus' commandment to love is to reconcile those who are at enmity with one another. Sermon 4, paragraph 6 says

And when you see those who are at enmity with one another, say "Brothers, blessed are those who make peace, who will be called the children of God." But the makers of peace are those who reconcile enemies, who bring into fellowship those who have been at a distance from one another. These are they who make the peace of their Father on earth, who are mediators between [enemies], reconciling them through intercession, humility, and admonition.

Here, as elsewhere<sup>39</sup>, the author made the Sermon on the Mount the definitive guide to the way of *gamirutha*, insisting that those who sought to follow the higher way

apply Jesus' words to concrete situations. The situation here was strife between individuals; applying Jesus command meant setting oneself in humility to the task of overcoming that strife, thus becoming a "maker of peace."

For the *Liber Graduum*, one best follows the way of *gamirutha* when one seeks to minister to those outside one's own community. Referring to the necessity of loving all other human beings, regardless of whether they seem to deserve it, the author asked

If the Scripture says that one should show compassion to the hungry and naked, is this limited to the hungry and the naked alone, or does it not also apply to the one who has done evil in all things? For if you have compassion [on the former group], is it not right that you should also [have compassion] on the sinner? Those who do this for the sinner in this world will themselves receive mercy in the world to come.<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, in the section which distinguishes the monastic "disciples of love" from the non-monastic "disciples of faith," (who also seem to be the ecclesiastical authorities<sup>41</sup>) the author criticized the latter group for drawing just such distinctions between those to whom they would minister:

Hear me, O children of the house of faith, and I will explain to you how you might mature! Do not say "this one is worthy, but that one is not." Instead, when you see those who are hungry, thirsty,



naked, or afflicted, whether good or bad, earnestly make peace with them, for in so doing you will gain your soul.<sup>42</sup>

Those whom the disciples of faith deemed unworthy the author identified elsewhere in this passage as sinners, pagans, and heretics. The monastic "disciples of love" refused to draw such distinctions between those to whom they addressed their love and concern. Sinners, pagans, and heretics may not have belonged to the "house of faith," yet they stood within the circle of God's loving consideration, and the author claimed that as such they should occupy the attention of those seeking *gamirutha* as well.

Seeking to minister to those (such as pagans) who might prefer to be left alone carries with it the danger of persecution at their hands, a danger thoroughly familiar to the author of the *Liber Graduum*. The text abounds in admonitions to love, pray for, and suffer on behalf of one's enemies and murderers. Pointing out the difference between how the followers of the two ways respond to situations of enmity, sermon 14, paragraph 1 says "The *kinē* do away with anger, and cease from it. But not only do the *gamirē* do away with anger, they love their murderers just as they do all people, and pray for

them." Similarly, a later passage insists that, alongside humility, love of one's enemies stands as the essential mark of the way of perfection:

This we know, that unless we impoverish and empty ourselves, [allowing ourselves] to be made holy and humble; and, unless according to the example of our Lord's death we keep all of the commandments [of *gamirutha* ] by loving our enemies and praying with compassion for those who seek to kill us, we will not be made perfect.<sup>43</sup>

Although such statements seem to presuppose a situation in which persecution of Christians did occur,<sup>44</sup> the author placed little value on martyrdom in itself. Suffering on behalf of the faith became efficacious only when one forgave, prayed for, and loved one's persecutors.<sup>45</sup>

Why this emphasis on loving one's enemies and those who would cause one harm? Because in so doing one best follows the example of Jesus, whose compassionate, forgiving response to those who put him to death provides the single greatest instance of that self-sacrificial love which stands at the heart of the way of *gamirutha*. Sermon 22, paragraph 11 explains that we should look to Jesus' example

when he washed the feet of his scoffers; when he kissed Judas and called him "my friend," instead of saying "Why have you come, murderer?" No, instead of this, he kissed him, in order that he might provide us an example. Therefore, let us do the

same to those who would do us harm; in this way we will overcome evil as our Lord, "the author and perfecter of our faith" showed us. Let us imitate him, in order that after his example we may be made perfect. Let us follow his example of praying for his crucifiers, by which he covered up their sins, even as they were cursing him.

One progresses along the way of *gamirutha* by emulating Christ's active love and concern for all with whom he came in contact. The height of his love for others lay in his forgiveness of and prayer for those who mocked him, beat him, and finally put him to death. The greatest of the commandments of *gamirutha* is to follow Christ's example by loving and giving oneself on behalf of one's enemies

### Conclusions

The *Liber Graduum* is fundamentally a treatise on the Christian life, with thoughts on how to make one's way along the pilgrimage to heaven comprising its central theme. The traveller can choose one of two routes in this pilgrimage: the way of *kinutha*, which involves engaging in married and economic life with faithfulness, honesty, and compassion on those in physical need: or the way of *gamirutha*, in which a monastic lifestyle frees one from the anxieties of economic life in order better to

love others. Since the search for *gamirutha* formed the principal objective of the monastic life, the author did not define this life primarily in terms of a means of attaining salvation through self-discipline and contemplation. Monasticism was rather chiefly a way of relating to other human beings in love. Acceptance, forgiveness, reconciliation, self-sacrifice; these headed the list of the monastic's tasks. Because monasticism existed for the purpose of facilitating one's progress along the way of *gamirutha*, the relational virtues occupy the center of the *Liber Graduum's* vision of the monastic life.

ENDNOTES

1. Syriac *kthaba d'masqatha*, a phrase which never appeared in the text itself, but rather originated in a later tradition.
2. Ser. 21, par. 3.
3. Ser. 21, par. 5.
4. Ser. 22, par. 14
5. Ser. 21, par. 4.
6. Ser. 21, par. 18.
7. The text contains numerous discussions of the Golden Rule as the primary ethical principle of the way of *kinutha*. Sermons 2 and 13, two of the best examples of this use of the Golden Rule, more often than not phrase it in its negative form as I have done here.
8. Ser. 3, par. 3.
9. The use of the term "prophet" (Syr. *nbiya*) occurs throughout the ninth sermon, entitled "On *kinutha* and the love of the *kinē* and the *nbiyē*."
10. Ser. 9, par. 2.
11. Ser. 9, par. 5.
12. Dorotheos of Gaza, speaking of this idea, told the following story:

I remember once we were speaking about humiliation and one of the great lights of Gaza, hearing us say "the nearer a man is to God, the more he sees himself to be a sinner," was astonished, and said, "How is this possible?" He did not know, and wanted to know the answer. I said to him, "Master of the First Rank, tell me, how do you regard yourself in respect to the other citizens here?" And he said, "I regard myself as great, and first among the citizens." I said then, "If you went away to Caesarea, how would you regard yourself then?" "I

would value myself somewhat less than the great folk there." So I said, "If you went away to Antioch, what then?" And he replied, "I would regard myself as one of the common people." I said, "If you went from the city of Caesarea into the presence of the Emperor, what would you think of yourself then?" He replied, "I should think of myself as just one of the poor." Then I said to him, "There you are! In the same way, the saints, the nearer they approach to God, the more they see themselves as sinners!" In *Dorotheos of Gaza: Discourses and Saying*, ed. and tran. by Eric P. Wheeler (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1977), 98-99.

13. Ser. 9, par. 8.

14. Ser. 9, par. 5.

15. The sentence structure which the author employed in these passages consistently leaves no doubt as to his meaning; God is the subject, the causative Aphel form of *ncht* (to descend or fall) the verb, the different Old Testament characters the object, with the prepositional phrase "from *gamirutha* modifying the verb. Note that the devaluation of the status of these individuals makes the *Liber Graduum* unique among the patristic interpretation of the Old Testament saints. Homily 5 of the *Spiritual Homilies* of Macarius refers to them as the "friends of God" and praises them unequivocally as models of the virtues the text enjoins upon its readers. Eusebius and Sozomen both listed Abraham, Moses, and the other Old Testament heroes as the first Christians (these references appear in I, 2 and I, 1, respectively, of Eusebius and Sozomen's *Ecclesiastical Histories*).

16. Ser. 9, par. 6.

17. The author spoke of God "making war" with humanity to refer to God's use of violent means to correct and punish human beings during their temporal lives.

18. Ser. 9, par. 12.

19. Chapter 2, pp. 54-56 details the author's objection to ecclesiastical leaders seeking to follow the way of *gamirutha* without first giving up their positions of authority.

20. Ser. 23, par. 1.
21. Ser. 17, par. 8.
22. Ser. 5, par. 4.
23. Ibid.
24. Ser. 11, par. 3.
25. As happened to the "disciples of faith" in Sermon 30.
26. Dörries spoke of the *Liber Graduum's* "Manichean" division of Christians into the "perfect" and the "just;" *Die Theologie des Makarios/Symeon* (Göttingen, 1978), 118. Similarly, Vööbus considered those who followed the way of *gamirutha* a conservative minority who radically separated themselves from the rest of the Syrian church; "Liber Graduum: Some Aspects of its Significance for the History of Early Syrian Asceticism," *Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile* 7 (1954), 120.
27. Ser. 13, par. 5.
28. Ser. 15, par. 9.
29. Ser. 3, par. 8.
30. Ser. 25, par. 8.
31. The idea that monastic poverty recreates God's provision for Adam and Eve in the garden presupposes the particular Syrian understanding of the inappropriateness to the monastic lifestyle of working to support oneself. See the discussion on pp. 81-92 of chapter 2 concerning the different attitude toward work which one finds among the early monastics of Syria and those of Egypt.
32. Interestingly, the *Liber Graduum* never uses the term "passions" to refer to these destructive emotions and attitudes.
33. Ser. 29, par. 1.
34. This constitutes the principal difference between the *Liber Graduum* on the one hand and Ephrem and Theodoret on

the other. For the latter two, self-mortification was a primary means of attaining perfection; for the former, discipline of the body facilitated the relational virtues, the primary means of achieving *gamirutha*. See the discussion on pp. 116-118 of ch. 3.

35. Ser. 5, par. 10.

36. Ser. 6, par. 11.

37. Ser. 4, par. 2.

38. Ser. 11, par. 2.

39. The entire second sermon consists of a commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, explaining how the followers of *gamirutha* may use the sermon's various injunctions as a guide to their service and love of others.

40. Ser. 22, par. 2.

41. See the discussion of the "disciples of love" and the "disciples of faith" in chapter 2, pp. 54-55.

42. Ser. 30, par. 10.

43. Ser. 20, par. 14.

44. This fact formed the basis of Kmosko's early dating of the text; see the discussion of this in chapter 1, pp. 14-15.

45. Sermon 30, paragraph 5 demonstrates the author's assessment of the worth of martyrdom by pointing out that even when they give their lives for their faith, the "disciples of faith" are still lesser than the "disciples of love," because the latter love their persecutors.



CHAPTER 5:  
The *Liber Graduum* and the Monastic  
Theology of the Early Church

Throughout this study I have asserted that active demonstrations of love and concern for other human beings stand at the center of the *Liber Graduum*'s understanding of the monastic life. The preeminence in the *Liber Graduum* of these relational virtues provides one basis for disputing the belief that this is a Messalian text, for the common understanding of Messalianism makes prayer the primary monastic task.<sup>1</sup> More especially, this assertion concerning the importance in this text of active ministry to others contradicts the belief that emphases on solitude and self-mortification constitute the essential characteristics of early Syrian monasticism (or, at least, that one can use these categories to characterize the entire Syrian branch of the early monastic movement). This study has attempted to demonstrate that, because of the text's insistence on the primacy of the relational virtues, these understandings of Messalianism and Syrian monasticism cannot serve as adequate tools for analyzing the theology of the *Liber Graduum*, but that on the contrary the study of this text can itself provide new insights into both the Messalian

and early Syrian monastic movements. Finally, through an examination of the *kinutha/gamirutha* distinction I have further pointed out that acts of acceptance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and self-sacrifice formed the heart of the anonymous author's vision of the monastic way.

Why does this matter? What consequences beyond a simple understanding of the *Liber Graduum* itself does this assertion of the importance of the relational virtues hold? In chapter 3 I claimed that a study of the *Liber Graduum* would deepen one's understanding of Syrian monasticism, in that this text manifests the inadequacy of the ascetical, individualistic model as a means of understanding the whole Syrian monastic movement. Similarly, I would suggest here that a knowledge of the centrality of the relational virtues to the theology of the *Liber Graduum* can result in a broader understanding of the monastic theology of the entire early church. In the chorus of texts arising from the early monastic tradition, the addition of the *Liber Graduum's* voice (particularly as regards this subject) will contribute significantly to one's perception of the whole.<sup>2</sup>

A study of the *Liber Graduum* can make three primary contributions to one's understanding of the early monastic movement: First, the *Liber Graduum's* claim that

the monastic life seeks to incorporate the true humanity of Christ makes explicit an idea at which other monastic texts strongly hint, yet never state as openly as does the *Liber Graduum*. The relative weight of this idea within the thought of the *Liber Graduum* calls for further examination of its presence in other texts, and strengthens the contention that it was a concept of some importance in the theology of the early monastic movement. Second, a comparison of the *Liber Graduum's* treatment of the relational virtues with those of other monastic texts demonstrates that the author insisted as strongly as any other monastic theologian (and more so than most) on the centrality to the monastic way of active demonstrations of love and concern for others. If the theology of the early monastic tradition runs along a spectrum, from contemplative emphases at one end to active and relational ones at the other, then I would suggest that the author of the *Liber Graduum* stretched the boundaries of the latter side of this spectrum. The strength of his insistence on the importance of the relational virtues renders one incapable of characterizing the early monastic theological tradition solely in terms of its contemplative components.<sup>3</sup> Finally, an examination of the *Liber Graduum's* lack of

interest in introspection will increase one's understanding of early monastic theology. Practically all of the representatives of this tradition, whether they leaned toward the contemplative or active sides of the above spectrum, concerned themselves to a considerable degree with the deep motivations and subtle attitudes out of which one's actions arose. That such is not the case for the *Liber Graduum* suggests that introspection was not such a universal element in the spirituality of the early monastics as one might previously have thought.

This chapter will examine those areas in which the *Liber Graduum* allows one a fuller comprehension of the monastic theology of the early church. Yet such an examination will also result in a further illumination of the theology of the *Liber Graduum* itself. The manner in which the early monastic theologians spoke of such ideas as perfection, the physical and spiritual disciplines, and the monastic virtues formed the context in which the author wrote this set of sermons, and in which his audience read them. An internal analysis of the text will yield a fair understanding of the relation of the author's ideas to one another, yet one will never grasp the *force* of the author's concepts and terms among those to whom he addressed them without reference to the

broader tradition of monastic theology.<sup>4</sup> For example, the author of the *Liber Graduum* insisted in a simple and straightforward manner that violence lies contrary to the monastic way of *gamirutha*. In illustration of this, he pointed to Moses, Abraham, and the other patriarchs' inability to achieve the state of *gamirutha* because they engaged in acts of violence (even though they did so at God's instigation).<sup>5</sup> This discussion of violence takes up relatively little space in the text's presentation of the way of *gamirutha*, and appears to be an unexceptional aspect of the author's thought until one realizes that his contention concerning the lesser position of the patriarchs has almost no parallel among the writings of the other monastic theologians, who regularly praised the Old Testament saints for their faith in the Christ who was to come and for their exemplary lives. Recognizing the singularity of the author's attitude toward the patriarchs leads one to assign far more significance to the rejection of violence which occasioned it.

Listening to the other monastic voices will allow one to hear the *Liber Graduum* more clearly in many such ways.

The monastic lifestyle as an incorporation  
into the true humanity of Christ

Why did one undertake the monastic pilgrimage? The answer, according to Basil of Caesarea, was simple: "The ascetical life has one aim - the soul's salvation; and all that can contribute to this end must be observed with as much fear as a divine command."<sup>6</sup> Yet the monastic life was a unique way of going about the search for salvation. It involved observing disciplines and inculcating virtues to a degree not present in the other forms of Christian life. The majority of Christians served God and sought salvation through faith, works of love, and participation in Christ's church through observance of the sacraments. To these more common requirements of the Christian pilgrimage the early monastics added separation from property, family life, and ordinary forms of society, a special devotion to prayer, and extraordinary service and love of others. From a non-monastic standpoint, this was going out of one's way to be a Christian. What motivated them to do so?

Throughout the literature of the early monastic movement one finds hints that its adherents viewed the monastic life as a particularly effective way of incorporating the true humanity of Christ. Beginning as early as Irenaeus's doctrine of recapitulation, Christian theologians had asserted that in our sinful world no one is a truly *human* being; the fear of death and self-centeredness which control our lives make ours counterfeit of the real humanity God created in Adam and Eve. With the exception of Adam and Eve before the Fall, only Christ conducted his life according to God's pattern of what it meant to be a human being;<sup>7</sup> if one wishes to be truly human, one must seek to live as Christ had lived. Specifically, one must love God and other human beings as Christ had loved. The early monastics believed their way of life especially suited to seeking to follow the example of Christ in being fully loving human beings. One engaged in the physical and spiritual disciplines of the monastic life for the purpose of ridding oneself of those destructive attitudes and emotions which rendered one less than human. These disciplines also served to inculcate those virtues by which Christ manifested to us God's pattern for an authentic human existence. This

search for a way of being truly human constituted an integral part of the early monastics' understanding of their vocation.

This understanding of the monastic life as an incorporation into the true humanity of Christ is more implicit than explicit in the early monastic literature. In various ways the different texts imply that following the monastic way means being a fully human person, as Christ had been; yet usually this remains far more understood than stated. The work of Dorotheos, a sixth-century Egyptian monastic, as well as the anonymous fifth-century Macarian homilies provide good examples of this fact. Both Dorotheos and pseudo-Macarius claimed that in the Incarnation Christ reclaimed the original pattern of humanity which had been lost in the Fall; and both moved from this discussion directly into an enumeration of the responsibilities which Christ's work makes incumbent upon monastics. After painting a lengthy picture of the Fall and its aftermath, Dorotheos said

Then at last the good, [humanity]-loving God sends [God's] only begotten Son. It was for God alone to heal and prevail against such miseries...Therefore our Lord did come, by being made [human] for our sakes, so that, as the scripture says, like should be healed by like, soul by soul, flesh by flesh, for he became completely human - without sin. He took our very substance and took his origin from our race and he became a New



Adam, like the Adam he himself had formed. For he renewed [humanity] in his nature, restored the depraved senses and sensibility of human nature to what it had been in the beginning...Therefore Christ gave us instructions, as I said, which purify our passions and those evil dispositions which come from the inner [person].<sup>8</sup>

Christ gave the instructions to which Dorotheos referred here to all Christians; yet Dorotheos believed they held special relevance for monastics, whose particular way of life especially enabled them to comply with them. The Macarian homilies provide a similar recitation of salvation history and its relation to the monastic lifestyle:

But when the evil word came to him [Adam] and conversed with him, he first received it through an external hearing. Then it penetrated into his heart and took charge of his whole being. When he was thus captured, creation, which ministered and served him, was captured with him. Through him death gained power over every soul and completely destroyed the image of Adam...Then, at this time, [God], who fashioned the body and soul, comes and undoes all the cunning of the wicked devil and all that he has wrought in the thoughts of [human beings]. [God] renews and forms a heavenly image and recreates the soul anew so that Adam again may be king over death and Lord over all creatures...He, therefore, commands us to leave the world and take on poverty and give up all tangible possessions. We are to have no earthly care but night and day we are to stand at the door waiting for the time when the Lord will open the closed hearts and pour into us the gift of the Holy Spirit.

He commanded us, therefore, to give up gold, silver, and relatives. We are to sell all our goods and distribute them<sup>9</sup> to the poor. Our treasure is to be sought in heaven.

Both texts make the re-creation of fallen human nature a primary purpose of the Incarnation, and having said this both exhort their readers to continue their journeys along the monastic pilgrimage. Did the authors of these texts place these exhortations in such close proximity to their discussions of the work of Christ because they considered the disciplines and virtues of the monastic lifestyle a means of laying hold in one's own life of that true humanity which Christ had reclaimed? The texts are by no means clear on this point, but I would suggest that emulating Christ's example of an authentic humanity did form an important element in these theologians' vision of the monastic way.

Basil of Caesarea, fourth-century defender of Nicene orthodoxy whose *Rule* has served as a model for much of the institutional life of Eastern Orthodox monasticism, also touched upon these ideas, yet in a significantly different form than Dorotheos and the author of the Macarian Homilies. As did they, Basil spoke of the Fall obscuring the image of God, rendering Adam and Eve less than fully human persons. Unlike them, however, he stated explicitly that the best way to reclaim this lost image lay in accepting the monastic vocation.

[Humanity] was made after the image and likeness of God; but sin marred the beauty of the image by dragging the soul down to passionate desires. Now, God, who made [humanity] is the true life. Therefore, when [human beings] lost [their] likeness to God, [they] lost [their] participation in the true life; separated and estranged from God as [they are], it is impossible for [them] to enjoy the blessedness of the divine life. Let us return, then, to the grace [which was ours] in the beginning and from which we have alienated ourselves by sin, and let us again adorn ourselves with the beauty of God's image, being made like to our Creator through the quieting of our passions...Now, an ally to the zeal of those who duly aspire to this gift is virginity. The grace of virginity, however, does not consist solely in abstaining from the procreation of children, but our whole life, conduct, and moral character should be virginal.<sup>10</sup>

From this point Basil proceeded to explain how the monastic life involves maintaining a virginal, or pure, attitude to the distractions of earthly life in one's service of God. Of importance to this study is Basil's statement that the life of "virginity" (the monastic life) serves as an ally to those who wish to become fully human individuals by reclaiming the lost image of God. Yet one is disappointed when one searches for an explicit connection here between the "true life" made possible by following the monastic way and the true humanity of Christ. Doubtless Basil would agree that Christ had exemplified what an authentic human life (one lived according to the image of God) was to be like, and that therefore in organizing their own lives according to

God's original design monastics made the true humanity of Christ their model.<sup>11</sup> Again, however, this remains more an implication of Basil's thought than a result of it.

One finds a stronger intimation of the idea that the monastic life involves an incorporation into the true humanity of Christ in the work of Isaac of Nineveh, a seventh-century Nestorian bishop who "repented" of his episcopacy after a brief tenure in order to become a monastic.<sup>12</sup> Isaac drew an imaginative connection between christological doctrine and monastic spirituality by speaking of the virtue of humility as that to which the preexistent Word joined itself in the Incarnation.

I desire to open my mouth, brethren, to speak on the elevated place of humility; but I am filled with fear, as a man who is conscious of the fact that he will speak concerning God in a tale of his own speech. For humility is the garment of divinity; for the Word which became human, put it on and spoke with us. And everyone who puts it on in truth, by humility takes the likeness of him who has descended from his height and concealed the splendor of his majesty and hidden his glory, lest the creation should perish by the sight of him. For the creation was not able to see him without his being united to a part of it which he should assume.<sup>13</sup>

For Isaac, humility was the most essential characteristic of that human nature which the Word assumed, so much so that the term "humility" became for him another way of referring to Christ's humanity. It was also the highest goal of the monastic life, the "all-encompassing

excellence."<sup>14</sup> Humility formed a bridge between the life of Christ and the lives of his monastic followers, for "everyone who puts on the garment in which our Creator appeared, by means of a body full of holiness, puts on Christ."<sup>15</sup> Achieving the monastic virtue of humility meant being human in the same way that Christ was human.

Why did one undertake the monastic pilgrimage? These texts suggest that one did so because in the monastic life one sought a different, more truly human, way to live, one which reflected the authentic humanity of Christ. What Dorotheos, pseudo-Macarius, Basil, Isaac, and other monastic theologians only suggested, however, the author of the *Liber Graduum* stated outright. In this text one finds the fullest exposition of an idea which, because it provides a significant theological underpinning to the entire monastic enterprise, is of no small consequence to one's understanding of the early monastic movement. A major reason for studying the *Liber Graduum* lies in the author's particular treatment of the connection between the monastic virtues and the humanity of Christ.

As did so many of the theologians of the early monastic movement (and indeed the larger patristic tradition), the author of the *Liber Graduum* asserted that one sees in the life of Christ a reflection of the true pattern of human life according to which God had intended Adam and Eve to live. Sermon 23, paragraph 1 says

Our Lord revealed this [way of *gamirutha*] in order that all human beings might know the state in which God created Adam. For in his very person our Lord manifested the creation of Adam, and demonstrated how he lived like one of the angels in heaven, without desire, lust, anxiety, or guilt. He was born in the form of Adam, in order that he might show human beings their original natures, and how they were created. For the apostle said "Everything has been made new in Jesus."

When Dorotheos, Basil, and pseudo-Macarius spoke of God's original pattern for humanity which Adam and Eve lost in the Fall, and which Christ reclaimed, they used the term "image of God." In referring to this true humanity which Christ shared with Adam and Eve, the *Liber Graduum* speaks of *gamirutha* (perfection).

The author also used the concept of *gamirutha* to describe the fundamental connection between Christ and monastics. As the third and fifteenth sermons especially indicate, following the way of *gamirutha* necessarily involves accepting a monastic lifestyle.<sup>16</sup> For the author of the *Liber Graduum*, the life of Christ served as

the definitive model of those relational virtues which lie at the heart of that lifestyle. He made this point by referring to Christ as "the firstborn of the *gamirē*" (perfect ones):

For our Lord was and is; and he has been with his Father from endless ages and will be unto ages without end. And no one will be made perfect<sup>17</sup> among the ranks of human beings unless he makes them perfect, for he must teach them how to be made perfect. On account of this he is called the first-born of the *gamirē*; in other words, he is the first *gamira* (perfect one), because he lived in that state of *gamirutha* in which God created Adam, and from which Adam fell. [He displayed] the purity of heart and the holiness like that of the angels with which God created Adam in order that he might not sin. Concerning this the apostle testified, saying "In Jesus all things have been renewed, as they were in the beginning"... He appeared to human beings in order that by imitating him they might be made perfect, so that he might be the firstborn of *gamirutha*, both on heaven and on earth, amen!<sup>18</sup>

This passage explicitly speaks of Christ as the first *gamira* (perfect one); he was the original monastic. He provided the model by which those who progressed along the monastic path sought *gamirutha*.

More specifically, in the life of Christ monastics saw the fullest expression of that love for others around which all of the commandments of *gamirutha* revolved. Before the Fall, Adam and Eve had lived according to these commandments; after it, their bondage to the "things of earth" produced an anxiety over daily life

which rendered them and their descendants unable to love God and one another as God had intended. Christ reclaimed God's intention for human life, the way of *gamirutha*, by being a fully loving person. For the author of the *Liber Graduum*, monastics also reclaimed this original humanity by following Christ's example of loving others. Sermon 22, paragraph 11 says

It is fitting that we should speak of the good works by which our Lord desires that we imitate him, so that by looking on him we might be made like him. For he humbled himself and sought to be reconciled to all human beings. He washed the feet of the one who scoffed him, and gave [the kiss of] peace to the one who betrayed him. He kissed Iscariot and called him "my friend," instead of asking "Where are you going, murderer?" No, he humbled himself and kissed him. Let this be to us an example, that we might do likewise to those who do evil to us. Let us overcome evil in this way, as did our Lord, "the one who begins and completes our faith." It is according to his example that we are made perfect; let us therefore imitate him. [Let us follow his example] when he prayed for those who crucified him, and when he covered up the sins of those who cast upon him insults and curses.

Being fully human meant following the way of *gamirutha*, and that in turn meant loving even those who sought to put one to death. By loving his persecutors Christ showed us what a truly human life (i.e. one lived according to the commandments of perfection) looked like. By imitating Christ's sacrificial love of others monastics shared in Christ's true humanity as well.



How can the *Liber Graduum's* discussion of monasticism as incorporation into the true humanity of Christ add to one's understanding of early monastic theology? First, by presenting a clearer picture of an idea which was common to many representatives of the monastic tradition. To the question of why they undertook the monastic lifestyle these individuals answered that in the monastic way they sought to reclaim God's authentic model for being human, as Christ had done before them. This conception appears in many monastic texts, yet usually in an understated form. The *Liber Graduum* presents a fuller, more systematic statement of this idea, demonstrating how it could function as a foundation for such other common monastic subjects as the physical and spiritual disciplines, and the commandment to love. When one encounters mention in other texts of monasticism as incorporation into the true humanity of Christ, a knowledge of the *Liber Graduum's* more detailed exposition of this idea will supply an excellent starting point from which to judge what it means and how it functions in these texts.

Such a comparison between the *Liber Graduum* and other monastic texts concerning the true humanity of Christ will result in the second of the former's

contribution to one's understanding of the monastic theological tradition. Although many of these texts agree that in the monastic way one seeks to be human in the same way as Christ was human, they disagree on what those essential characteristics of Christ's life which monastics ought to emulate were. In the *Liber Graduum*, Christ's self-sacrifice on behalf of his enemies and persecutors makes up this essential characteristic. In Gregory of Nyssa's *On Perfection* a variety of virtues, such as being at peace with others and conducting one's life with justice, comprise the manner in which one takes on the "names" of Christ, thereby taking on his true humanity as well. For pseudo-Macarius, the fullness of Christ's communion with God in prayer stood prominently among the characteristics which monastics were to imitate. All of these divergent interpretations of the essential characteristics of Christ's life began at a common starting point, the idea that monasticism involves incorporation into the true humanity of Christ. While the *Liber Graduum* helps one grasp the meaning of an idea which many representatives of the monastic tradition held in common, at the same time it impresses one with the diversity of that tradition as well.

The *Liber Graduum's* unique  
understanding of the relational virtues

Upon reading the literature of the early monastic movement for the first time one is impressed with the extent to which these people thought about how to get along with one another. The *Apophthegmata Patrum* contains stories of monastics breaking their fasts to show hospitality to a guest. Isaac of Nineveh suggested that one praise one's unkind neighbors for their kindness to induce them to act as though they were kind. Evagrius defined monastics as those who are at harmony with all human beings, because in the lives of others they see their own reflected. Here and in numerous other places the early monastic texts abound in examinations of human relations and instructions on how to carry out Christ's commandment to love.

To this, of course, the *Liber Graduum* is no exception. Indeed, such exhortations to acceptance, forgiveness, and reconciliation with others form the very heart of this text's spirituality. Yet each monastic theologian conceived of these relational virtues in a different way. The unique feature of the *Liber Graduum's* thought is the degree to which it centers its vision of

the monastic life on these active demonstrations of love and concern for others. A study of the *Liber Graduum* will, probably better than any other text, reveal the range of meanings the relational and active aspects of monastic spirituality could hold within this tradition.

I have already dealt in chapter four with the first of these unique points: the author's assertion of the complete incompatibility of acts of violence with the monastic way, and the singular interpretation of the Old Testament saints by which he communicated this assertion.<sup>19</sup> The attitudes of the early monastics toward violence were by no means uniform; the inhabitants of the Egyptian desert could be particularly rowdy, and church leaders such as the Alexandrian bishops Theophilus and Cyril quite adeptly employed violent mobs of monastics as (often effective) instruments of policy.<sup>20</sup> Yet many representatives of the monastic tradition believed that separation from the world included leaving behind strife and contentions, and the violence with which individuals so often tried to resolve them. Pachomius, the fourth-century founder of Egyptian coenobitic monasticism, warned that striking another in this world would lead to the torments of fire in the next.<sup>21</sup> In 407-408 a monastic community at Scetis, centered around the abba

Moses, faced annihilation at the hands of barbarian invaders. Moses refused either to resist or flee; having been a highwayman and a robber in his pre-monastic days, he accepted the invasion as God's judgment on his previous life. His disciples remained with him and were also killed.<sup>22</sup> The author of the *Liber Graduum* stood firmly among these who considered violence inimical to the monastic lifestyle.

What stands out about the author's views on this subject is his use of the rejection of violence to assign the Old Testament patriarchs a somewhat diminished status. Throughout the literature of early monasticism Old Testament figures such as Abraham, Moses, David, and the prophets regularly receive praise for their faith in the Christ who was to come and their obedience to God's commands in spite of the faithlessness of those around them. Macarius singled out Job and Abraham as exemplars of the patience and forbearance in the face of hardship which God requires of Christians, and later referred to them and those in the Old Testament like them as the "friends of God."<sup>23</sup> Gregory of Nyssa's *The Life of Moses* portrays the experiences of the great leader of Israel as the definitive guide to Christian life. And Pachomius said that for whatever form of Christian pilgrimage one

chose one could find exemplars among the heroes of Israel: "If you wish to live among [human beings] imitate Abraham, Lot, Moses, and Samuel. If you wish to live in the desert, all the prophets have led the way there before you. Be like them, wandering in the deserts, valleys, and caves of the earth."<sup>24</sup> The early monastic attitude toward the Old Testament saints seems to be one of complete admiration.

In practically all respects the author of the *Liber Graduum* did not depart from this tradition of interpretation. The Old Testament faithful (all of whom the author referred to as "prophets") were models of the lesser way of *kinutha*, while some of them even displayed that conspicuous love of others which characterizes the way of *gamirutha*. "Thus all of the prophets hoped and waited for that which God had prepared and would reveal [in Christ], but some of them approached the love [which belongs to] *gamirutha*."<sup>25</sup> Moses's willingness that God blot his own name out of the book of life so that God might spare the Israelites impressed the author deeply; his description of this encounter between Moses and God is one of the most lyrical passages in the entire work.<sup>26</sup> Abraham, Joseph, David and other of the "prophets" also demonstrated that love of others so essential to the way

of *gamirutha*. In this the *Liber Graduum*'s approach to the patriarchs stands firmly within a consensus among early monastics concerning the interpretation of the Old Testament.

Yet in the midst of this discussion one comes upon the singular assertion that one cannot speak of these individuals as though they did indeed achieve *gamirutha*: "Thus God held the prophets back in those days from the commandments of love which belong to *gamirutha*" says sermon 9, paragraph 2. Why is this? Because God employed these individuals as agents of the divine judgment, and this involved them in acts of violence. Even though they did so at God's instigation, the patriarchs' participation in acts of violence automatically relegated them to a lesser status. Although patristic exegetes did sometimes refer to a state of enmity which existed between God and humanity between the Fall and the coming of Christ, and spoke of the patriarchs' role in carrying out God's wrath, the *Liber Graduum* stands alone in asserting that this activity deprived them in some way of a complete fellowship with God.

How does one explain this dualistic interpretation of the Old Testament saints? One does so by reference to the attitude toward violence which occasioned it. So strong was the author's belief in the antithesis between violence and the monastic way that he was willing to contradict a well-established tradition of interpretation (and indeed, himself as well) to assert this belief. Although other monastics such as Pachomius also eschewed the use of violence, the author of the *Liber Graduum's* insistence on the rejection of violence is particularly vociferous and comprises one of the areas in which this text stands out in the context of the monastic theology of the early church.

Another such area is the tension between the exercise of reproof and discipline on the one hand, and the avoidance of judgmentalness on the other. One finds in the writings of the early monastics an almost universal condemnation of the sin of assessing the spiritual condition of others and passing judgment on them. Yet the monastic vision also insisted that the members of the monastic community bear responsibility for one another; central to the Egyptian system of small groups of disciples living with one teacher was the idea that the teacher take notice of the faults and sins of



his/her erring disciples, admonish them, and finally subject them to discipline. Could one exercise discipline without being judgmental? The *Liber Graduum's* answer to this question forms another of its unique interpretations of the relational virtues.

One finds the most unequivocal statements on the need for discipline within the monastic community in the *Rules* of Basil and Benedict. Although sensitive to the danger of passing judgment, both considered the responsibility monastics shared for each other's welfare so essential that it included seeing to it that members of the community not endanger their souls by continuing in sin. Basil insisted that it is wrong to allow another's sin to remain secret: "According to the Lord's injunction, every sin must be made known to the superior, either by the sinner himself, or by those who are cognizant of his fault, if they themselves are not able to effect a cure; for vice kept secret is a festering wound in the soul."<sup>27</sup> Once the leaders of the community knew that one of their charges was at fault, they must by no means allow that individual to go unrebuked:

He who is charged with supervision should feel as if he is liable to an account for each individual under his care. He should bear in mind that if one of the brethren falls into sin, not having been forewarned by him of the ordinance of God, or if, having

fallen, he remains in that state, uninstructed as to the manner of making amends, the blood of that one will be required at his hands, as it is written;- especially if he neglect that which is pleasing to God, not through ignorance, but for flattery's sake, accommodating himself to each one's vices and relaxing strict discipline.<sup>28</sup>

Following the pattern of ecclesiastical discipline laid out in Matthew 18, chapter 23 of Benedict's *Rule* suggested that two elders first admonish an erring brother privately, and then make his fault known in the presence of the entire community if he would not repent. Even Dorotheos, who was particularly sensitive to the destructive consequences of passing judgment on others, approved of rebuking an erring monastic before the rest of the community.<sup>29</sup>

Other texts display greater awareness of the tension between the practice of discipline and the need to avoid judgmentalness. The Sahidic version of the *Life of Pachomius* tells how Pachomius's first monastic community failed because of his reluctance to impose discipline on its members. Fearing the dangers of making oneself a watchdog over another's soul, Pachomius sought to guide his followers purely by example. When their laziness degenerated into contempt for Pachomius and disregard for the daily office, he drove them out and started over,

this time establishing a strict rule of discipline.<sup>30</sup> Pachomius wanted to avoid the inherent dangers of such discipline, but found that he could not.

The *Apophthegmata Patrum* evidences a similar ambiguity to the exercise of discipline, yet one which leans toward foregoing its use out of fear of the sin of judgmentalness. Because it is a collection of sayings and stories concerning different members of the Egyptian monastic community, this text displays more diversity within itself than any other at which we have looked. The *Apophthegmata's* teachings on discipline well illustrate this fact. On one hand, one does find here instances in which the abbas and ammas exercised strict discipline over their small communities, such as the time Abba Arsenius expelled a brother who would not heed the old man's admonitions to stop stealing from the other disciples.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, far more often the *Apophthegmata* conveys a recognition that such discipline carries with it the danger of usurping God's role of judge, as Abba Isaac discovered in this story:

Abba Isaac of the Thebaid came to a community and saw one of the brother's to be blameworthy, and sentenced him. But when he had gone out to the desert, the angel of the Lord came and stood in front of the door of his cell, and said: "I will not let you go in." He asked: "Why not?" And the angel of the Lord answered: "God sent me to say this to

you: 'Where do you command me to send that blameworthy brother whom you sentenced?'" And at once Abba Isaac did penance, saying: "I have sinned, forgive me." And the angel said: "Arise, God forgives you. But in the future take care you judge no [one] before God has judged [that person]."<sup>32</sup>

Yet primarily it was the abbas and ammas' reluctance to cut the offending party off from the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation which motivated their reluctance to discipline their followers.

Abba Ammonas came to eat one day in a place where there was a monk of evil repute. Now it happened that a woman came and entered the cell of the brother of evil reputation. The dwellers of that place, having learned this, were troubled, and gathered together to chase the brother from his cell. Knowing that Bishop Ammonas was in the place, they asked him to join them. When the brother in question learned this, he hid the woman in a large cask. The crowd of monks came to the place. Now Abba Ammonas saw the position clearly, but for the sake of God he kept the secret; he entered, seated himself on the cask, and when they had searched everywhere without finding the woman, Abba Ammonas said, "What is this? May God forgive you for this accusation!" After praying he made everyone go out, then taking the brother by the hand he said, "Brother, be on your guard." With these words, he withdrew."<sup>33</sup>

Isaac learned that punishing a member of the community could endanger one's own soul; Ammonas already knew that it endangered the soul of the offender as well.

One finds considerable diversity among the early monastic attitudes toward reproof and discipline, from Basil's insistence that one must inform the superior if a

member of the community falls into conspicuous error, and that the superior must act upon this knowledge, to the *Apophthegmata Patrum's* ambiguous yet highly skeptical approach to the whole business of rebuking and punishing one's monastic colleagues. The *Liber Graduum's* perspective on the issue of discipline completes this spectrum, for once again the author was anything but equivocal in his contention that the exercise of discipline necessarily involved one in the sin of passing judgment. Unlike the *Rule of Benedict*, which makes Matthew 18's guidelines concerning ecclesiastical discipline a model for the monastic community, the *Liber Graduum* contends that bringing another's sins to *anyone's* attention violates the highest monastic obligation, the law of love:

Our Lord said "Do not judge," but also "Bring [the offender] into shame in the presence of the whole congregation." But if you follow the second of these, to which [of the two ways] do you belong? If you judge, you will have fallen from the higher commandment which prohibits judging. But if you do not judge, you will have condemned the commandment which says "Shame him in the presence of the whole congregation."

According to the *Liber Graduum*, in Matthew 18 Jesus was speaking to the non-monastic followers of the lesser way of *kinutha*; those who journey along the way of perfection believe that their task is to love others, not see to it

that their sins be punished. The author never considered Basil's argument that reproofing and disciplining another could be an expression of love and concern for that person's welfare; he equated discipline with judging, and one could not love the person upon whom one had passed judgment.

Once again here the *Liber Graduum* articulates a common monastic view of human relations, yet does so in a particularly forceful manner. Concern for avoiding judgmental attitudes toward others is universal among the early monastic theologians. For some, this concern created little problem for their belief that caring for one's fellow monastics included admonishing, rebuking, and punishing them when they erred; others were aware of an uneasy tension between the two. For the author of the *Liber Graduum*, they were diametrically opposed. This attitude toward discipline and judgmentalness forms another of the *Liber Graduum's* most unique interpretations of the relational virtues. As with the rejection of violence, so one discovers here that the most striking aspects of the *Liber Graduum's* teaching on the monastic life revolve around the stridency of its call for active love and concern for others.

But for which others? When the early monastics spoke of the need to minister to one's fellow human beings, who specifically did they have in mind? This question receives little direct attention in the various texts at which we have been looking, yet in its answer lies one of the most novel aspects of the *Liber Graduum's* interpretation of the relational virtues.

"Any ascetic life or practice that is without love is a stranger to God."<sup>34</sup> So said Maximus Confessor, seventh-century orthodox opponent of the Monophysites and theologian of the monastic life, articulating a fundamental conviction of the early monastic movement. Elsewhere Maximus insisted that "the love for one another makes firm the love for God," and that the purpose of the physical disciplines of the monastic life was to free one of attachment to worldly things and focus one's attention on loving others.<sup>35</sup> Evagrius Ponticus, a fourth-century monastic writer whose contemplative spirituality resembles that of Maximus, said in a similar vein "The goal of the ascetic life is love."<sup>36</sup> But whom is one to love? The members of the monastic community? The church? The entire world? Maximus and Evagrius simply never said.

Lest one find me facetious here, this question did occupy the attention of at least one monastic theologian. Better than anyone else, Basil of Caesarea realized that if one were to fulfill the monastic life's highest obligation, the commandment to love, one needed to live in some kind of community in which contact with others made such demonstrations of love possible. This is why, according to Basil, the coenobitic life better fulfills the monastic vocation than the life of a solitary.

I consider that life passed in company with a number of persons in the same habitation is more advantageous in many respects [than the solitary life]...The doctrine of the love of Christ does not permit the individual to be concerned solely with his own private interests. "Love," says the apostle, "seeks not its own." But a life passed in solitude is concerned only with the private service of individual needs. This is openly opposed to the law of love which the apostle fulfilled, who sought not what was profitable to himself, but to many, that they might be saved.<sup>37</sup>

In daily life among the members of one's monastic community one found the opportunities for the service and love of others essential to the monastic way.

Dorotheos's observations on the large and small ways one displays love for others are the most winsome in the early monastic writings.<sup>38</sup> When exhorting his listeners to follow the commandments of love, he always pointed to their monastic companions as the ones to whom they were



to direct their ministry of love and concern. Did Basil and Dorotheos conceive of no obligation on the part of monastics to love those outside the ranks of their own community? No; more likely their focus on other monastics reflects the fact that they directed their remarks to members of organized coenobitic communities, who did not always have much contact with outsiders.

Such contact with outsiders did occur, although with more regularity in some communities than others. One finds frequent mention of interchanges between the monastics and their non-monastic neighbors in the *Apophthegmata*. The desert, although a formidable barrier, did not completely prevent the monastics of Egypt from ministering to the laypeople of the surrounding villages, as one of the stories concerning an abba whose ministry it was to feed the poor indicates.<sup>39</sup> Yet most of the encounters in the *Apophthegmata* take place among monastics, and it is primarily in the context of their dealings with one another that one discovers their teachings on love of other human beings.

Remembering that monastic life meant separation from ordinary society, one should not be surprised that when the early monastics spoke of the obligation to love, they referred most often to the love that the members of the

monastic community shared for one another. Here again the *Liber Graduum* displays its singular approach to the relational virtues by redirecting the focus of its monastic readers' ministry to other human beings. With Maximus and the other monastic writers, the author of the *Liber Graduum* agreed that one best demonstrates one's love of God by loving God's creatures, one's fellow human beings. Unlike them, however, he did not assume that one's best opportunity to do so lay in loving those with whom one came in contact most frequently, one's monastic colleagues. Rather, the text insists again and again that following Christ's example meant loving those *outside* the circle of one's own community. One such category of outsiders are those whose beliefs or conduct prevent them from being "children of the house of the Father," such as pagans and sinners:

If the Scripture says that one should show compassion to the hungry and naked, is this limited to the hungry and the naked alone, or does it not also apply to the one who has done evil in all things? For if you have compassion [on the former group], is it not right that you should also [have compassion] on the sinner? Those who do this for the sinner in this world will themselves receive mercy in the world to come.<sup>40</sup>

But those toward whom the author of the *Liber Graduum* most often counseled his readers to fulfill the commandment to love were their enemies, those who for whatever reason sought to do the monastics harm. By praying for, being reconciled to, and finally giving their lives on behalf of their persecutors, monastics best emulated Jesus' example of self-giving love.<sup>41</sup>

Once again, that which stands out about the author's particular perspective on this issue is its forcefulness. Insistence on love of others runs throughout the monastic tradition. Some texts direct this love specifically to members of one's monastic community; others expand this to include those non-monastics with whom one comes in contact as well; others fail to specify altogether. The *Liber Graduum* contends that one is to make those outside the community of faith and even one's own enemies the special focus of one's attempt to fulfill Jesus' commandment to love.

Forgiveness, acceptance, reconciliation, giving of oneself in love; these formed the essential monastic tasks for the author of the *Liber Graduum*. Yet this does not finally tell one all one needs to know, for the author was not alone in this belief; finding a way to be fully loving persons was the central goal of most of the

representatives of the monastic tradition.<sup>42</sup> Only an examination of the *Liber Graduum's* teachings on the relational virtues within the context of what other monastic voices had to say on the same subject will reveal what the author's statements meant to himself and the audience for whom he wrote. Such an examination demonstrates that, on the issues of violence, discipline, and the objects of one's love and ministry, the author took positions consistent with the larger monastic tradition, yet in every case stated that position in the strongest terms. In each case the author leaned his argument as much as possible toward concern for others. It is as if the author decided that, if he were to err, it would be on the side of overstating his case, rather than allowing any ambiguity to exist concerning the monastic obligation to engage in active demonstrations of love for one's neighbor. As was the case with its teaching on the monastic life as an incorporation into the true humanity of Christ, so the strength of the *Liber Graduum's* conviction that love of others is the most essential monastic characteristic can broaden one's understanding of the theology of the early monastic movement. Each monastic text has its own emphases, and if one were to read only certain texts, one might come

away with an inaccurate picture of the theology of early monasticism. For example, the strain of contemplative piety which runs through much of this tradition makes up the predominant element in the writings of Evagrius and of Diadochus of Photice, a mid-fifth century monastic theologian. If one were to make these authors the sole basis of one's interpretation of the entire early monastic movement, one might assert that its members concerned themselves primarily with study and contemplative prayer.

An examination of the *Liber Graduum* will not allow one to make such a generalization. This text insists so strongly on actions and attitudes which demonstrate love and concern for others as to leave no doubt that for its author, all other aspects of the monastic life were secondary to this one. This fact further impresses one with the diversity of the early monastic theological tradition, for if some texts seem primarily to emphasize the contemplative side of monastic spirituality, the *Liber Graduum* leans equally as far in the other direction. The *Liber Graduum* therefore confounds any attempt to characterize the monastic movement either solely or primarily in terms of its contemplative aspects.

The *Liber Graduum* and the practice of introspection

In its teachings on monasticism as incorporation into the true humanity of Christ and on the relational virtues, the *Liber Graduum* holds many points of contact with other texts from the monastic tradition. In one area, however, it seems to stand alone: unlike almost every other theologian from this tradition, the author of this text expressed little or no concern for examining the attitudes and motivations which lie behind human actions. The lack of emphasis on introspection in this text raises questions as to whether it was as universally important to the spirituality of the early monastics as one might otherwise have thought.

Beginning with the earliest writings of the monastic movement, one finds an insistence that monastics examine themselves that they might better understand their own spiritual condition. According to Antony, the demons often suggested to monastics that they increase their fasting or the length of their prayers to bring them to despair when they were unable to do so.<sup>43</sup> The great anchorite warned his disciples always to be aware of the

state of their souls and to evaluate carefully the voices within them, in order to guard against the demons' treachery.

Such discussions of introspection appear in both those texts which contain more contemplative understandings of monastic life, and those which emphasize its active, relational aspects. Evagrius claimed that one must understand one's motivations if the contemplative prayer which features so prominently in his vision of the monastic life is to have any worth.

Observe whether you truly stand before God in your prayer or whether you are under some compulsion that drives you to seek recognition from [human beings], striving in this manner after their approval. When indulged to this end your protracted prayer is nothing better than a pretext.<sup>44</sup>

Dorotheos insisted that self-examination and self-knowledge were the necessary prerequisites to the active love of others which he considered the highest obligation of the monastic life. In a sermon on anger he claimed that what starts out as an insignificant moment of irritation can lead easily to a fiery rage. One must be aware of what is going on in one's heart, so that when such minor irritations and annoyances arise, one can extinguish them quickly, before they lead to anger and perhaps violence against a neighbor.

Such references to self-examination, so common in other monastic texts, practically never appear in the *Liber Graduum*. In speaking of the obligations of the monastic life, its author moved his attention away from the self and toward other people. The commandments of *gamirutha*, which the text presents as the highest obligations of the monastic way, most often involve action directed toward the service of others, not reflection on the condition of one's own soul. Even when the author spoke of attitudes (such as humility and non-judgmentalness) rather than actions, he made the objects of these attitudes his prime consideration, rather than their subjects. One finds a good example of this in the author's frequent use of Paul's injunction in Philippians 2:3, "Consider all to be better than yourself," as a definition of humility; humility here is not so much a characteristic of one's personality as a way of directing one's thought toward others which enables one to love them. With the service of others as his primary task, the author saw little need for turning his attention inward.

One finds further illustration of this fact in the absence from the *Liber Graduum* of another common monastic theological theme, the idea of the passions. The early



monastics named those destructive attitudes and ways of looking at the world which prevented one from serving God and loving other human beings the passions. Evagrius provided the most systematic discussion of the passions, yet most monastic texts, from the Macarian Homilies to the *Apophthegmata Patrum* to the works of Isaac of Nineveh, mention them. Such negative attitudes and emotions as avarice, anger, vainglory, and pride cloud one's spiritual and moral vision, rendering one unable to see the world and other human beings as God does. The early monastics insisted on the importance of introspection because only by concerted, honest examination of the self could one identify these passions and ask for God's help in dealing with them.<sup>45</sup>

Yet here again the *Liber Graduum* strikes us with its lack of attention to such a common monastic theme, for it contains no mention of the passions. Its use of the word *hashē*, the Syriac term which translates "the passions," refers to the sufferings of Christ, not to this set of destructive emotions. It often mentions the sinful attitude of judgmentalness, yet never calls it one of the passions, nor does its treatment of judgmentalness indicate the need to deal with it through introspection.

His failure to speak of the passions points again to the author of the *Liber Graduum's* lack of concern for the widespread monastic practice of self-examination.

The consequences of this aspect of the *Liber Graduum's* thought for the early monastic theological tradition will not be as far-reaching as the others which I have mentioned above. It is possible that the difference between this text and others on this issue is more apparent than real, in that the author may have so presupposed the importance of introspection as to find no need to mention it. The fact that most of the other early monastic theologians (who, presumably, also presupposed its importance) did refer openly to the need for self-examination and self-knowledge renders this explanation unlikely. Of greater probability is the suggestion that the *Liber Graduum's* failure to prescribe self-inspection is simply an anomaly, and should not raise further questions.

Yet because the *Liber Graduum* contains one of the earliest and most penetrating treatments of the way of perfection to come from Syria, a major center of the early monastic movement, one should pause before dismissing it so easily. Perhaps it can broaden somewhat one's understanding of early monasticism on this issue as

well. Without reference to the *Liber Graduum*, one can say that the early monastic theologians universally insisted on self-examination and self-knowledge as prerequisites to the performance of one's monastic tasks, whether those tasks were contemplative or relational in nature. Upon studying the *Liber Graduum*, however, one cannot be so sure. At least one major representative of the early monastic theological tradition found little or no place for introspection in his vision of the monastic way. Once again, the *Liber Graduum* leads one to recognize the considerable diversity within this tradition.

### Conclusions

The purpose of this chapter has been to demonstrate the manner in which a study of the *Liber Graduum* will result in a greater understanding of that larger tradition of monastic theology from which this text arose and to which it contributed. In its detailed exposition of the monastic life as an incorporation into Christ's true humanity, the *Liber Graduum* provides a good starting point for one's interpretation of similar, yet less well-developed, ideas in other texts. Its forceful insistence

on the preeminence of the relational virtues demonstrates how far a text can lean toward the active, relational side of the spectrum of monastic spirituality, and helps prevent one from characterizing the early monastic tradition solely or primarily in terms of its contemplative aspects. Finally, by making little or no reference to the practice of introspection, a practice which holds some degree of significance in practically all the other monastic texts of this period, the *Liber Graduum* reminds one of the diversity of the early monastic theological tradition. In at least these three areas, a study of the *Liber Graduum* will bear fruit for one's knowledge and appreciation of the monastic theology of the early church.

This fact should in turn lead to a similar increase in how one knows and values this particular Syrian monastic text. While the main thesis of this dissertation has centered on the relational virtues in the author's vision of the monastic life, a sub-thesis has tried to impress on the reader the importance of this text within the history of Christian thought. Its illumination of Messalianism, of early Syrian monasticism, and of the broader monastic theological tradition demonstrate that the *Liber Graduum* deserves

serious scholarly attention. Its length and unavailability in a modern language have conspired to deprive it of that attention. I hope that this dissertation, by pointing out certain of those areas in which this text deepens one's understanding of the history of the church and its theology, will have provided an impetus to further scholarly investigation of the *Liber Graduum*. Such investigation will not go unrewarded.

ENDNOTES

1. In chapter 2 I have both denied that the *Liber Graduum* contains such a Messalian understanding of the centrality of prayer in expelling the demon in every human soul and suggested that this common understanding of Messalianism stands itself in need of revision, which the *Liber Graduum* can help provide.
2. Such an analogy assumes that one accepts (as I do) some kind of coherence or commonality to these early monastic texts which allows one to make such generalizations as "the monastic tradition."
3. Chapter 3 makes a similar point about characterizations of early Syrian monasticism. At the least, the *Liber Graduum*'s relational understanding of monastic life leads one to realize that Ephrem and Theodoret's emphasis on individualism and self-mortification cannot suffice as a characterization of the whole Syriac-speaking monastic tradition. Further, the *Liber Graduum* renders one unable simply to pass by those sections of Ephrem and Theodoret's descriptions of the Syrian monks which reflect relational understandings of the monastic way.
4. For a discussion of the idea of "illocutionary force," in which one seeks the meaning of a text's ideas by asking how the author intended to use them and how his intended audience would perceive them, given the understanding of similar terms and ideas within the author and audience's contexts, see Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 8 (1969), 3-53.
5. See the discussion of this idea on pp. 144-148 of chapter 4.
6. Basil of Caesarea, "An Ascetical Discourse," in *Saint Basil: Ascetical Works*, ed. and tran. by M. Monica Wagner, C.S.C, in *FC*, vol. 9 (1950), 217.
7. And, according to Irenaeus, since before the Fall as well, for God created Adam and Eve with the potential to mature into fully loving human beings, but they fell before they realized this potential.

8. In *Dorotheos of Gaza: Discourses and Saying*, ed. and tran. by Eric P. Wheeler (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1977), 79-80.
9. Pseudo-Macarius, *Spiritual Homilies* 11:5-7, in *Intoxicated with God: Fifty Spiritual Homilies of St. Macarius*, ed. and tran. by George Maloney, S.J. (Denville, N.J., 1978), 78-79.
10. Basil, "An Ascetical Discourse," in Wagner, 207-208.
11. In a treatise entitled "On the Renunciation of the World" Basil stated that the monastic virtues involved obeying Christ's precepts and following the example of his life; Wagner, 15ff.
12. In *Isaac of Nineveh: Mystical Treatises*, ed. and tran. by A.J. Wensinck (Amsterdam, 1923) p. 371.
13. Ibid., p. 384.
14. " , p. 387.
15. " , p. 385.
16. One can also see this in the fact that the author on occasion used the more common Syriac terms for monastics, *ihidayē* and *bnai qyama*, to refer to the followers of *gamirutha*. For the use of the term *ihidayē*, see especially ser. 30, par. 1; for *bnai qyama*, see ser. 10, par. 9.
17. Syriac *ethgamar*, a passive form of the verb *gmr*, to perfect, from which the abstract *gamirutha* derives.
18. Ser. 30, par. 24.
19. Pp. 107-110 above.
- 20.. See Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI, 7, and VII, 14.
21. Pachomius, "Instruction Concerning a Spiteful Monk," par. 40, in *Pachomian Koinonia*, ed. and tran. by Armand Veilleux (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1982), 3:32.
22. See Derwas Chitty, *The Desert a City* (Crestwood, NY, 1966), 60-61.

23. Macarian Homilies, 5:7. The term "friends of God" as a designation for the Old Testament saints is a familiar one in patristic literature; the church historians Eusebius and Sozomen employed it to speak of these figures from the Old Testament as the earliest Christians. See in this regard Glenn F. Chesnut, *The First Christian Histories* (Paris, 1977), 95-96.

24. Pachomius, "Instructions," par. 18, in Veilleux, 3:19.

25. Ser. 9, par. 2.

26. Ser. 9, par. 5.

27. Basil, *Rule*, Question 46, in Wagner, 324-325.

28. Ibid, Question 25, in Wagner, 286-287.

29. *Dorotheos*, 158-159.

30. *Life of Pachomius* (first Sahidic version), pars. 10-19, in Veilleux, 1:430-438.

31. In Owen Chadwick, *Western Asceticism* (Philadelphia, 1958), 109.

32. Ibid, 102.

33. In *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, tran. by Benedicta Ward, S.L.G (Oxford, 1981), 28.

34. Maximus Confessor, *The Ascetic Life*, tran. by Polycarp Sherwood, O.S.B., in *ACW*, vol. 21 (1955), 125.

35. Ibid, 106-107.

36. Evagrius Ponticus, *The Praktikos* #84, tran. by John Bamberger, O.C.S.O (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1981), 37.

37. Basil, *Rule*, question 7, in Wagner, 248.

38. See for example his discussion on pp. 106-107 concerning how certain looks can wound another's heart and one's own conscience.



39. Chadwick, p. 147.

40. Ser. 22, par. 2.

41. See the discussion of this on pp. 164-171 of chapter 4.

42. One should note here that not all early monastics concerned themselves with the quest to serve God by loving and ministering to other people. The *Apophthegmata*, which contains the most appealing expositions in this whole body of literature on how one goes about loving others also refers to monastics for whom avoidance of all contact with other people comprised the only path to perfection.

43. Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, ch. 25.

44. Evagrius, *Chapters on Prayer* 40, in Bamberger, 61.

45. For a discussion of the early monastic conception of the passions, see Roberta C. Bondi, *To Love as God Loves* (Philadelphia, 1987), pp. 57-77.

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